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CAN SUCH THINGS BE?

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Sanders
Burleigh
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"CAN SUCH THINGS BE?"

OR

THE WEIRD OF THE BERESFORDS

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"CAN SUCH THINGS BE?"

OR

THE WEIRD OF THE BERESFORDS

A STUDY IN OCCULT WILL-POWER

BY

KEITH FLEMING

AUTHOR OF "BY THE NIGHT EXPRESS"

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us (our Life's star)
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar."

"There are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS
BROADWAY, LUDGATE HILL
GLASGOW, MANCHESTER, AND NEW YORK
1899

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

In crown 8vo, sewed,

BY THE NIGHT EXPRESS:

A PSYCHOLOGICAL ROMANCE.

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PREFACE.

I CANNOT pretend to account for, or in any way attempt to explain, the extraordinary mystery of the following tale. I only try to tell the mere facts of a marvellous unearthly experience in all the same as here related, save that she who went through this great horror lived—though but for a brief week or two—and told the story of that terrible night.

Many will, doubtless, assert that it must have been a dream, an hallucination, or the phantasmagoria of a diseased fancy; that either insanity, or the strange optical delusions and imaginations engendered by opiates when they fail as sleep inducers, must be the true solution of this weird problem. And possibly they may be right; but one or two unalterable, inexplicable facts remain.

The mysterious music was heard by others besides her to whom the ghastly manifestation

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was made; and, above all, the singular disappearance of the violin, its reappearance a year later, and its still more marvellous and weirdly-mystic vanishing at the moment of death, are inexplicable phenomena.

I think it necessary to say this little word of deprecation, as apology for offering to the world a tale almost too wild for belief.

ARNOLD DYSART, M.A., F.R.S.,
Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge,
and Professor of Modern Philosophy.

CAMBRIDGE,
June 17th, 1883.

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PART I.

HIS VIOLIN.

"There are more things in heaven and earth
Than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

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"CAN SUCH THINGS BE?"

OR,

THE WEIRD OF THE BERESFORDS.

CHAPTER I.

ALONE!

As the last stroke of midnight sounds on the still, frosty air, and the sweet Christmas bells ring out in a burst of glad triumphant harmony, old Maxwell Beresford's spirit passes away unto the God who gave it, and his daughter Eunice is indeed alone —a desolate, friendless loneliness, very terrible to contemplate.

These two have been so thoroughly all in all to each other, have lived so utterly in and for one another, for such a number of years now, that the daughter can scarcely remember or imagine any other state of being. Her mother died when she was but ten years of age. She is now some years past forty; and in all that long time, save for a

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brief halcyon interlude, more than twenty years ago (but her lover had to travel to distant lands, and for long, long years his bones have been bleaching under an Indian sun), none have come into this father's and daughter's life, to disturb its even, monotonous current, to cheer or sadden, or in any way break the long union of these two, connected by that closest of all ties—parent and child.

And now—she is alone! Alone in the cold, cruel, pitiless world, with not one hand outstretched across that awful silence, in friendship or compassion; alone and poor (for her father's means died with him), with youth and hope behind her, and an open grave in front.

Maxwell Beresford was in all things a disappointed man. Life with him had been a failure in those things that men hold dear. Success had been denied him; the ambitions, hopes, and aspirations of his earlier years had never reached fruition. His marriage, also, had been somewhat unfortunate, and had not yielded him the happiness he craved. Worldly prosperity was not his, and all his love and dreams and hopes centred in his little daughter; in her bright and radiant future he would live and be glad again. But the cloud had darkened his own life, that cast its brooding shadow o'er his child's. A brilliant, happy future seemed suddenly to open to his Eunice, but only to close up again into the grey dreary blank, that became all the gloomier when shorn of hope, and sorrow-laden. Yes, his girl's life was

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blighted at its outset; she grew old and grave and sad, while the bloom of freshest, loveliest youth was on her brow. And so these two maimed and narrowed lives grew closer, each finding in the other the solace, the sympathy, the happiness which the outside world denied them—"the world forgetting, by the world forgot."

Such was the story of the Beresfords' lives during those latter years. And now, for all time, they are divided. One has gone forth into the great unknown, and has left the other behind, to mourn in a desperate, infinite loneliness.

And what makes this solitariness and isolation seem more awful is, that Eunice must, perforce, go forth and face that hard, unsympathetic world; she must leave her home—the home of her race, the home in which she has spent her whole existence, save for three or four baby years. Even now, as she gazes down in a passion of unutterable grief on that dear dead face—even now, it is no longer her own, but has already, with that spent breath, passed away into the possession of aliens and strangers.

This great grey old Manor House, in which Eunice has lived her life, is the last remnant of the Beresford property, once vast and flourishing; but now even the name is extinct, and Eunice, the last of her race, must go forth in a few days, not only to face the world, but to fight it single-handed; to try and add to the miserable pittance of some £30 a year, which is about all she will be

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able to call her own. To increase this scanty store, she must work—alas! poor Eunice! at her age, and having lived such a life of refined seclusion, with no rough-rubbing or sharp contact with the callous world to prepare her for the fray. But though timid, shrinking, and sensitive, Eunice Beresford is true to the instincts of her race. She has a faithful, unselfish heart, coupled with infinite endurance and unending patience; she accepts her fate with a resigned and Christian spirit. And by-and-by, when she bids an eternal farewell to that dear old Manor, with which all memories of him whom she has lost are so indissolubly connected, that the familiar house and grounds seem like a part of her own very being, she does so through blinding tears, but not with a bitter, rebellious spirit. An infinite trust, rather, is the attitude of her broken heart—trust in God's goodness and mercy; He will not leave her desolate. And deep down in her breast, unconfessed even to herself, but yet there, is the hope, the longing, that this desolation will soon be broken, in the only one way that can give her reunion with that beloved lost father. It cannot be for long, that she feels—this blank, cold barrier of separation. Life has naught to offer her, death has much. She will live on as long as God wills, unmurmuringly, patiently waiting for the end that will bring her joy and peace ineffable; but surely that end will not be very long in coming. And, in the meantime, she will struggle bravely, and try to bear meekly,

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without impious repining, her heavy burden of sorrow, taking up the broken threads of her life, and essaying to weave them into as goodly a garment of Christian fortitude and endurance as she may.

These are desolate Eunice's thoughts and yearnings and resolutions, as she drives away alone from the only home she remembers—away to that distant cheap lodging, in a respectable, though somewhat humble neighbourhood of the busy city, a few miles outside of which she has lived her life.

It seems singular—some might say, almost impossible—how any one could be so completely alone as Eunice Beresford, not being a stranger in a strange place—a circumstance which always accounts for intensest solitariness; but it is easily explained. When Maxwell Beresford succeeded his father as squire of the Manor, and took possession of his barren heritage, he was even then a weary, world-worn, disappointed man, though his little daughter was but four years of age. He shrank from meeting strangers, and gave himself up somewhat to the life of a morbid recluse, living in and with his music and his books.

His wife, a gay and frivolous woman of fashion, had become already a confirmed invalid; and, between physical suffering and seriously crippled means, she also shrank from the world during the half-dozen years she lived; and, save her attendant physician, no stranger entered the doors of the Manor House.

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Gradually this isolated mode of life grew so on Mr. Beresford, that he could contemplate no other; and through all the days of his daughter's childhood there was no alteration.

The little girl had governesses, therefore she had not even the chance of making school friends.

By-and-by, when she was grown, she made a few acquaintances—one could hardly call them by the stronger term—as youth must and will; but when her own life was shattered, and all its sweet promise buried in a far-away grave, she too withdrew from the small world that had been hers for a brief space. Shunning those whom she knew and mingled with during the short sunshine of her life, she drew back into the shadow which seemed her portion, as well as her beloved father's; and none cared to follow into its drear duskiness. And so the years rolled on, and the few young people she had known in life's glad morning are now dead, or scattered, or faded into unknowingness, and Eunice, as we see, is utterly alone.

. . . . . .

To increase the miserable yearly sum that would barely save her from actual starvation, she determines to get a little teaching. She loves music with all her heart and soul. Dear as are her books to her, yet her piano has been still more of a solace—a faithful friend that cheered and comforted and soothed in the long years of her shadowed life. Music was a passion with the Beresfords, both father and child; and old Max-

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well's violin and Eunice's piano led a wedded life of truest concord, and were continually blent in sweetest harmony and union.

Both loved the divine art for its own sake, and not for the sake of shining before others, as it was only the unresponsive walls of their lonely home heard the wild, sweet, wailing music that they delighted in. Yes, Eunice is fortunate, and possesses a speciality; and when some few months are gone by, and the first fresh torturing anguish of her sorrow has somewhat spent itself, she awakes to the knowledge that there is business as well as grief in the world for her; awakes to the knowledge that she has already four pupils, all girls over fifteen, each of whom pays her two guineas a month. And the knowledge that she can earn the bread that is necessary to life—though that life she would gladly lay down—is pleasant, even though that bread must ever be mixed for her with tears and sorrow.

And now a sort of saddened peace, a dreary, desolate restfulness, comes to Eunice, after those first few months of active, agonized sorrow. During those first days of her mourning, after she had left her old home, life seemed insupportable. Pray as she might for resignation, for strength to endure, the hideous, awful loneliness was so terrible, the sudden, complete severance from that one friend, who had never failed her since she was born, was so frightful, so impossible to realize, and yet such a soul-crushing fact, that she felt she must either

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go mad or die. She and her father, who had scarcely been apart a day; from whom, looking forward, she felt she could never be separated, they loved each other so well,—now to be divided for ever! at least, for all time; and to know nothing of him—*where he was*, or *what he was!* Was he no longer the loved parent, whose intangible presence seemed ever near her? Or must she think of him only as an ethereal essence, a spirit, cold, passionless, sublimated, purified from all mortal dross, with no remnant or memory of the humanity that was so dear to her?

The thought of meeting him again in that guise brought no satisfaction or comfort, but, rather, dismay and shrinking—a disembodied soul!

> "When, leaving the body, out to the free ether thou reachest,
> A god undying thou shalt be, no longer a mortal."

These lines were ever in her mind during those first days, and brought her desolation instead of solace. She longed and craved and yearned for the father she had known, the earthly being she had loved so well; and these wild, speculative thoughts, that would intrude themselves, only made her faint with shuddering scepticism and despair. But "Time the consoler" lays its softening healing hand on this wounded heart, and when some six months have glided into the past since that terribly sad Christmas Eve, Eunice Beresford has regained her calm, steadfast faith and trust, that never wavered, until half-stunned

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by the force of a paralyzing blow; and she has also regained, in a measure, the noble endurance, the sweet, serene patience, that have been hers through life. "All will be right in the end," she whispers to herself. She, and *he*, so lately gone out into the darkness of nothingness, and that other *he*, she "loved long since and lost awhile," will all be reunited in God's own good time—reunited for all eternity. The unshakable conviction grows each day stronger in her breast, that the great and wise Creator never implanted in the human heart the capability of such true, intense, unchanging love, merely to serve our little span on earth. These unsearchable mysteries of love, these unfathomable depths of man's heart, were fashioned for everlasting, and not for a day. "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." So the apostle speaks of the life, the breath; but so he does not speak of that God-like attribute in man—*love*. "Many waters cannot quench love;" no, not even the Lethe of death.

The order of her life is changed to an extent; she has new duties and responsibilities—duties that infuse a faint flavour of interest in the performing; Eunice being not merely a painstaking automatic teacher, bent only on bringing on her pupils, but one who feels an individual regard and interest in each young life thus brought into contact with her own.

Thus her mornings are passed in work that

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occupies without fatiguing, and is consequently healthful. Her late afternoons and evenings are her own, to spend with the books she delights in, or the music that is her second self. Her beloved piano from the Manor has accompanied her in her exile; that, and her father's violin, her dearest, most treasured possession, are almost the only visible links in her present obscure home that connect her with the past.

When she brings herself to play again, which is not for months, she always opens that dear violin case, leaving the enclosed silent inmate within sight; and somehow she fancies she feels less lonely thus.

That same violin has somewhat of a strange history of its own. It is old, very old, and has been in the family for generations, belonging to a far-away ancestor of Maxwell's, whose life history had been a shadowed one, according to tradition; which said that his wife had played him false, and had murdered either him or her lover somewhere in the eastern gable of the Manor House, which was declared to be haunted by her unresting spirit. This, at least, was the popular legend attached to Eunice's home; but she thought little of it. The phantom presence had never made any sign during her time or her father's, and she often forgot the strange old story connected with the house, of which there was no record whatever among the family papers; but she did know of the violin's antiquity, and had, in consequence, a sort

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of veneration, almost verging on reverence, for it. It seemed a part of themselves, as if it bore a mystic life that somehow linked it with the family. Of course it was only imagination, but it sometimes seemed to her a sensient creature, with a human wail of sorrow in its wondrous voice. It had been her father's best and dearest friend, save herself—his "familiar," as she would laughingly say; and for this reason, if for no other, she loved and treasured it.

And so the year wanes and wastes for Eunice Beresford in the calm, uneventful, monotonous routine of this new life—routine that is so often as a bulwark to saddened, broken-hearted women; a moral defence, entrenched behind which they struggle on, hopeless but enduring, deprived of which they would collapse and die.

Though her pupils increase, and her income improves, yet still she remains on in the obscure home she has made for herself. The street is respectable, though situated in a somewhat humble neighbourhood, and the house quiet in the extreme; the only occupants being the owner, a lady, elderly, frail, and partly deaf, but gentle and kind-hearted, and her servant, a cheerful, obliging young woman, who seems to think it a pleasure to do Eunice's small behests.

A house in which the only lodger can be as secluded, as utterly alone, solitary, and quiet, as if it were her own,—this is what Eunice craves, and this is the reason why she remains. She shrinks

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from the idea of the stir of gay young life, noise, bustle, excitement.

When her day's duties are over, she likes to creep to her quiet rooms, and there, with those inanimate intellectual companions, pass her long hours of leisure; though it would be much more wholesome for her if she were compelled to mingle more, if she were not thus enabled to indulge her love of solitude, and so perhaps foster singular mystic thoughts and imaginings.

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CHAPTER II.

VANISHED!

THE year has worn almost to its close; Christmas Eve has again come round—Christmas Eve, so glad, so joyous a season for nearly all; the saddest day in the year for Eunice Beresford. Was it not with its expiring breath, and the new-born moment of the holy morning, that Maxwell Beresford passed into the "silent land," and left his daughter desolate?

Yesterday Eunice bade her pupils "good-bye" for a fortnight, and this most melancholy anniversary is the first day of her liberty. All those long, sad hours she spends in unbroken solitude, and sorrow that forbids all occupation. Better for her were she compelled to work till she almost dropped, than thus to muse and grieve and yearn.

She feels tired—so tired—towards evening, and half determines to go to bed early (quite contrary to her habitual custom, as in no circumstances does she leave her sitting-room till past twelve), and try to forget her troubles in sleep; but she changes her mind suddenly. To-night, of all nights

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in the year, she must remain up and awake. Must she not live, in spirit, over again that moment of anguish last year? Would it be even respectful or reverential to that dear memory to pass in sleep the first return of the time when soul and body underwent their mystic parting? Besides, she feels involuntarily that it would be yielding to a sort of cowardice; for as the hour grows later, she is half-conscious of an eerie sense of expectation — a watchful, nervous, half-formed dread, for which she despises and condemns herself.

So she heaps coal upon her fire, turns up the lamp, to give a brighter light, and, for the first time that day, tries to seek in occupation a refuge from unhappy thoughts.

The piano—she cannot touch it—and the violin in its case, which rests upon it, are closed and mute. She has been trying to rub up her German lately, which has got somewhat rusted. Some of Heine's poems in the original she is studying with much delight; and now she brings out her books, and settles herself for an hour or two's work. The poem that presents itself for to-night's reading (she is going through her small selection regularly) is, by a strange chance, the singular legend of "Geoffry Rudèl and Melisanda of Tripoli." Doubtless, all know the story of how the Countess Melisanda saw Geoffry dying on the beach; they kissed and loved; he died, and she worked the scene into the tapestry. And

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Eunice dwells long, with a strange thrill at her heart, on these two verses, which are rendered thus in an English translation :—

"In the Château Blay at night-time,
Comes a rushing, crackling, shaking;
On the tapestry the figures
Suddenly to life are waking.

"Troubadour and lady stretch their
Drowsy ghost-like members yonder,
And, from out the wall advancing,
Up and down the hall they wander."

The whole weird poem has a sort of fascination for her, and she lingers over it, until at last the fatigue and drowsiness that oppressed her earlier in the evening overcome her, and she drops asleep about eleven o'clock—profound, dreamless sleep, from which she starts suddenly, vividly, to hear the neighbouring church clock strike twelve; and, with the last stroke of midnight, and just as the bells in a glad, sweet jangle break upon the still, cold air, a loud startling knock resounds through the silent house.

Now, one of Maxwell Beresford's most decided characteristics was his mode of demanding ingress; his knock was long, loud, peremptory, even when he was broken in health and spirits. And Eunice now recognizes it—first (out of her sleep, before she remembers) with a thrill of delirious joy; then, as the steps move swiftly, in answer to that imperative summons, a feeling of awe, fear, astonished expectation steals over her, as she hearkens

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to the beloved familiar footfall ascending! What mystery is she on the brink of penetrating? . . . Then the step pauses, the door-handle is softly turned, while she remains transfixed, immovable, with dilated eyes gazing at that slowly opening door. How horribly slowly it moves! . . . And what will be revealed in the void beyond? . . . Then, with a cry of rapturous delight, she starts to her feet, and speeds across the room, for there on the threshold stands Maxwell Beresford!

Yes, it is he, and no other—even himself; no mocking semblance or optical delusion. For one instant she pauses, gazing in frenzied, non-comprehending joy and wonder at the dear face for which she has hungered. The next moment her arms are round his neck. Ah! thank Heaven, all lingering doubt vanishes. This is no spirit, no ghost, but warm, living humanity.

How she clings, and cries, and gasps incoherent questions, the answers to which, seem to reach her through a fog! It is as if a mist enveloped her brain, her thoughts and ideas are so hazy and unreal. But through the confusion there is the one grand dominant feeling of thanksgiving and gratitude unutterable. Her father "was dead, and is alive again," "was lost, and is found." Time enough by-and-by to try and understand how it all is; now she can only rejoice with an exceeding great joy.

How wonderful it is to look on that beloved face again!—that noble, grand old head, with the

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long, snowy hair resting on the coat collar; the great dark, dreamy eyes that age or sorrow could not dim. She leads him over to the easy-chair by the fire, and brings wine, for he looks weary and worn, and kneels at his feet in a transport of speechless gladness and content. And then after a little he explains to her the mystery of his presence,—how when he had appeared to die, it was but a trance, which left him conscious, though, to all seeming, dead; and then, when, on the last night before the coffin was closed, he regained the power of movement—the fearful catalepsy that had bound him in iron chains falling suddenly away, and leaving him free in the dead of night—he rose from out that awful thing which would have closed on him for ever on the morrow, made a semblance of a figure beneath that terrible winding-sheet (in the early winter daylight the change would escape observation), and then stole away—away, so that none might know. And when Eunice asks in astonished query, why the secrecy, the concealment, that gave her such agony of grief? why he had not come straight to her, that they might give thanks together for the marvellous blessing of life restored, he speaks vaguely of motives, strong motives, that necessitated his acting as he did, compelling him all this time to refrain from making any sign. But all seems wrapped in mystery incomprehensible; her head is dazed and bewildered, she cannot think or understand properly, and his talk is vague, dreamy,

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misty. But, after all, what matters anything but the one grand fact? Her father is not dead! It was all a mistake, a horrible mistake. He has come back to her! Great and sudden joy sometimes kills, but she has survived the shock; and they will be happy once more in the old quiet way, and look back upon all this past misery as only a vivid, terrible dream. Perhaps it has been only a dream, she thinks; her mind feels so clouded and obscure, that all seems unreal and visionary.

. . . . . .

The long hours of the night pass away in loving reunion. They take up the thread where it snapped a year ago, so easily that no break is discernible; and by-and-by he plays. The violin that has been so long mute (mourning the hand that made it laugh or weep as that hand dictated) once more speaks, and sighs, and shrieks, and groans, in a tumult of wailing, tempestuous sorrow; and Eunice sits in a trance of wondering dismay. Why is the violin not glad? It ought to be glad—so glad! It surely *is* an independent creature, a spirit, a voice, a living, palpitating something, that is sighing and sobbing through the room. It is sorrow and despair embodied thus in sound—wild, wailing, terribly sad sound—and it ought to be all joy to-night.

How wondrously he plays, she thinks, as she looks at the great rapt eyes of the old man, and the streaming white hair; he seems music's very soul! Never in past years has he played like this.

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Wild, strange harmonies he has always affected; but these weird, singular strains seem unearthly, laden with mysterious, wordless sorrow. She shivers with an undefined dread as she listens. And then the theme suddenly changes, and soars to higher, purer regions. Sublimated, exalted, majestic, it grows more and more, until at last she is, as it were, hearkening to the "Song of the Redeemed" in heaven. *A violin's voice?* Surely not, but the echo of an angelic choir.

As he ceases, she notices that the first faint grey streaks of the late winter dawn show sickly pale through the window-blinds. He rises, with a shudder, still holding the violin, and moves to the door; he will come back soon, very soon—come back for her; but he must go now. When he comes again he will take her with him. She cries, entreating him not to leave her, but to take her now. He quietly disengages her clinging, detaining arms; he cannot wait, but he will come again soon—soon! And, so saying, he reaches the door, still holding the violin pressed close to his side. On the threshold he turns and looks back. Spell-bound, she gazes in silence on those dark, sad eyes, that seem to have gained a strange, new, unfathomable light. And then, as she looks, *he is no longer there!* Out into the void beyond the threshold she gazes on blank nothingness!

She is conscious at the same moment of the room having become in an instant dark and chill. Lamp and fire seem suddenly extinguished! With

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a cry of instinctive terror, she tries to reach that open door way, and with that cry she awakes—awakes in perfect darkness, save for the gleam of a street lamp just opposite her window, that diffuses a ghost-like glimmer of light through the room; awakes cold, scared, bewildered, on the very spot on the sofa where she had established herself with her books at ten o'clock!

There is the little table beside her—the light is strong enough to discern it dimly; and the book that her hand rests on, as she stretches it out, is Heine, open at the poem of "Geoffry Rudèl." She had fallen asleep, she knows and remembers; but was it possible that she had never waked from that sleep till now; that when she appeared to herself to start suddenly from profound slumber into vivid, instant wakefulness, to hear the church clock strike twelve, and the bells ring out in a clashing peal, that she only then passed into dreamland—dreamland that very possibly she was ushered into by those pealing, jangling bells striking on the sleeping ear, and inducing that weird, realistic vision from their connection in her mind with her sorrow of a year ago? *Only a dream!* she thinks, as she rises, with stiff, cramped limbs, and nervous, frightened glances into the duskiness around her. The rapture, the delight, the joy in that wondrous reunion was but a figment of the brain, after all. Her father has not come back to her; she is solitary and alone as ever. And yet it was so awfully vivid,

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realistic, consecutive. It is hard, oh, so hard, to think it but a dream!

And then, with groping fingers, she strikes a light. The ashes in the grate are cold and grey, the fire has long been dead. She looks at her watch. Four o'clock—and she has been sleeping since eleven! She had slept, though she determined not, through the time when we cross at midnight the boundary 'twixt night and morning, and when he had crossed the boundary 'twixt life and death. And yet, at the very same moment when he left her a year ago, he returned to-night in sleep. Was it sleep? she again questions, with a strange thrill at her heart. She has dreamt of her father often, since he died—dreamed that he was living, dreamed that he was dead, but never of his having been given back to her from the grave; and it is a cruel disappointment to find it all a baseless vision.

Again she looks lingeringly round the room, almost finding it hard to understand why the arm-chair does not stand near the hearth, as in her dream, with the little table close by, holding wine and glasses. The chair is back in its accustomed corner, the table stands by her sofa, and the wine is invisible in her cabinet; but as her eyes range slowly round, they are caught and held by one startling difference. The violin-case on the piano, that was closed when she fell asleep, is open, *and the violin gone!*

For an instant she believes her sight deceives

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her; but when she realizes that it is indeed a fact, her heart gives one wild throb, and then stands still; her brain reels, and she clutches a chair to support herself.

The violin gone!

All round the chamber her appalled eyes travel, hoping that by some strange, unaccountable freak she may have removed it from its case in her sleep, and placed it elsewhere. But this one hope of a natural solution of the weird problem soon fades. The violin is, indeed, incontrovertibly gone! And *how did it go?*

That no earthly hands removed it, she at once feels certain. Her landlady and her servant are every night in bed, and the house is securely fastened up before eleven o'clock; besides, say it were possible that any one could have entered the room while she slept with felonious intent—is it likely that they would have contented themselves with the violin, or touched it at all, when her purse lay on the mantelshelf, and her watch rested in a little stand close by, besides scattered trifles, more or less of value, relics of her old home?

No; another presence besides her own has been in that room to-night; but that presence has been an unearthly one! A guest from shadow-land has sat by her hearth, and that guest her father!

She now firmly believes that the extraordinary experience she has been through was no dream, but that in her sleep her spirit partly freed itself from the trammels of the flesh, and caught a

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glimpse "behind the veil." *He* had come, and her eyes had been opened, and she saw him as he is in the world of shades. But still there must have been some phantasy of the sleeping brain mingled with the spirit sight and sense, else why the strange, incomprehensible confusion of his not having died, and being still in the flesh? He may have often come to her before, but her eyes had not been opened, her ears had not caught the sound of that wondrous music that was not of this earth.

And the violin is gone! She remembers how he appeared to hold it closer, closer, as he vanished through the doorway!

What weird mystery has this night held in its sacred bosom? Is it—as she once read—that, when asleep, we are strangely, awfully near the confines of the other world—just hovering on the boundary between the real and the unreal; that between the visible and the invisible the veil is then so thin as to be almost transparent; and that in some phases of temperament, health, or circumstance, the spirit actually goes forth from the sleeping body, and has separate existence, touching mysteries unapproachable by the awake understanding, imprisoned in its fleshly tabernacle?

Sometimes, for all our finite humanity knows, soul and body lead thus a dual and distinct life; and in some peculiar organizations, where the nerve and brain-power outweigh the carnal nature, and the man lives more in his mind than in his body, during the hours of darkness, sleep, and

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silence, the spirit escapes from its earthly bondage, and wanders free and unfettered; and, possibly, the singular impressions so many have at times of other experience outside the present life—faint, shadowy remembrances that one cannot grasp; illusive, yet penetrating—may be traced to this double life of the soul, and not to a pre-existent state in another sphere, as many assert that these unaccountable impressions prove.

Possibly also the "mesmeric sleep" into which individuals of a certain highly-strung, nervous, sensitive organism can be thrown by those possessing the marvellous magnetic power, and in which the eyes of the spirit are opened, while their earthly eyes are closed in unconsciousness, and they see what the natural eye could never see, also annihilating time and space, seeing and hearing and feeling what is distant, still in futurity, or absorbed into the past, is another proof of the soul's dual life.

Such a theory has been advanced; and Eunice, having read on the subject, thinks of it now, with an irrepressible shudder, though she feels a strange glad, exultant joy within. She may be allowed by-and-by to hold communion with her beloved dead, not through the medium of sleep or vision, but spirit actually touching spirit. And ought she not to rejoice instead of to fear? And yet the weak humanity cannot be altogether exorcised, and she shudders again.

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For many days and weeks the remembrance of this singular experience, the strange mystery of Christmas Eve, remains ever present with Eunice. She goes about as one under some introspective spell, while she is always conscious of a feeling of expectation, unrest, apprehension. But as time passes the impression becomes less vivid, less intense; she grows to believe it was a dream, realistic and startling, but still only a dream; natural enough, considering how her thoughts were saturated with the one subject. The problem of the missing violin remains unsolved, and is a mystery which she seeks no longer to unravel; it is beyond her skill, and she must perforce let it rest as it is. It is gone, and its disappearance cannot be accounted for; but she will try to struggle against the supernatural dread that has laid hold of her. And if it is ever given to the flesh to see the things of the spirit; if her father should return to her in dream or vision, surely, she ought to rejoice, not fear.

And so, about eight or nine weeks later, striving against a singular foreboding of some strange manifestation, she forces herself to play again in the evening, as is her wont.

The empty violin-case has a sort of fascination for her, and she cannot withdraw her gaze from it as she plays. The first two nights all is as usual, but on the third she is scarcely playing ten minutes—a wild, sweet, plaintive melody, a favourite in the olden time—when she suddenly becomes conscious

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that she is *accompanied by a violin!* It is as if there were half a dozen rooms on the same level, and that in the farthest, with the door half-closed, was the violin-player! Clear, distinct, yet low and softened by distance, come the vibrating notes. Eunice's blood turns to ice as she hears the familiar strains—the voice she knows so well, *the* violin's voice, the missing violin—and knows whose shadowy hand is making it speak! . . . It was no dream, then, after all. He did come, and took the violin with him. And though she feels half-dead with supernatural terror, her heart beating to suffocation, the moisture of a deadly awe upon her brow, she continues playing, as if compelled by some power outside her own. Her hands feel weak, nerveless, helpless; yet her fingers weave these subtle, intricate minor harmonies unerringly, unbrokenly. . . . And still the wailing voice of the violin comes to her ear, now softer, now louder, sighing, sobbing through the room in melancholy cadence!

. . . . . .

At last, after about an hour, she is released from the mystic spell that bound her, and rises, white and weary and worn, from the unnatural ordeal. And yet when that unearthly music ceases, she feels a strange void; the sudden silence oppresses her with a sense of desertion and intense solitude, as if she were alone in some new dumb world. And this feeling develops into so strong and irrepressible a yearning to hear once more, if she

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may, those phantom strains, that on the following evening, at the same hour, she is impelled to play again, though a sickening terror possesses her; and, as before, after a little, that weird violin's voice is heard clear and low.

And so, as the weeks go on, Eunice Beresford grows to lead a sort of double life: through the daytime, in the world and of it to an extent; while in the night she seems to have a partnership with the land of spirits, through the medium of that mysterious music.

She grows to love it with an absorbing love, hardly feeling to live save in its presence. For, every evening now, those strange occult harmonies are to be heard. Sometimes the strains are sweet, soothing, familiar; at others, weird, startling, blood-curdling, like that night of her vision; or again, soaring into empyrean heights of heavenly melody.

This phantom music is not now heard only by Eunice in ghostly accompaniment to her own playing, but long after she ceases wild bursts of strange, wonderful harmonies float through the room!

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CHAPTER III.

HER VISION.

"And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns."

As the months roll on, this unearthly influence, this invisible companionship of the dead (for that the mysterious violinist is her father, she has no doubt) leaves its impress on Eunice Beresford. She becomes strangely silent, wrapt in abstracted reverie; her attention wanders from her pupils during her working hours. Her eyes have gained such a dreamy introspective light, and, withal, there is such an aspect at times of watching, straining, listening, in the worn face, that these fresh, young, happy creatures grow to shrink almost, with a sort of fear, from the gentle woman whom they had loved. She seems so strange and visionary and changed. And as the year glides away into the dreary, dank, cheerless days of late autumn, when all nature seems mourning for her shorn joys, and sorrowful human life is at its saddest; when the rapidly shortening days remind one so pitilessly of the shortening life, that each hour draws nearer

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to the darkness, unfathomable, of the end,—that "night" when "no man can work," that is stealing surely on all and each; when it wants but a month or so of another Christmas,—Eunice finds herself without a pupil. By degrees, all have fallen off, chilled by the singular absorption, the eerie silence, and far-away gaze of their teacher. Her instruction was excellent, all that could be desired. In fact, on two or three of the few occasions she had played for her pupils during these latter months, they, and others who had heard, marvelled at her music. It seemed as if a spirit, not of this world, had entered into the quiet, sad-faced woman's fingers, and spoke of divine mysteries or demoniacal horrors through them. When asked what she had played (the mystic, wondrous strains being unfamiliar), she had each time passed her hand wearily across her brow, and replied vaguely that she did not know! . . . So they got afraid of her, these young people and their friends; and now, as Christmas approaches, she is more alone than ever, with that stern, relentless foe, grim poverty, facing her, as her future life companion.

But just at this juncture an old and dear friend of her father's, who had been long abroad, but whom she had known well in her childhood and girlhood—in fact, almost the only visitor to whom the Manor House opened its doors in those far-away days—returned to England, sought her out, heard with grief of his old friend's death, and was pained and shocked at the terrible change in

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Eunice;—the bright, beautiful girl he remembers so well, to see her again thus! How sad, how dreadful it is! To see her old before her time, broken-hearted, lonely, and desperately poor, would be grievous enough when he recalls the brilliant, lovely dawn of this greyest afternoon; but he is still more distressed to discover the strange absorption of her mind in what he considers wild, visionary hallucinations. It seems like the shadow of coming insanity, he thinks, with a pang. However, he does his best for her: he makes arrangements with the gentleman into whose hands the Manor passed on her father's death for her return there for a few months, hoping that the old familiar surroundings will break this weird attitude of waiting and watching that seems to have settled upon her; will dispel those wild fancies of an ever phantom-presence and unearthly music in which she lives.

It is late in October, just two months from Christmas, when he gets her transferred to the Manor House, back to the same half-dozen rooms on the one level that she and her father occupied almost altogether of late years, seldom using any other of the multitude of apartments—many falling into mournful decay—in that great, rambling old pile.

Mrs. Hancock, the faithful old housekeeper, who loved and honoured the Beresfords, both father and daughter, is still at her post, the new owner having temporarily retained her and the two or

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three other servants who formed old Maxwell's sole household. She is delighted to welcome back her beloved Miss Eunice.

But Eunice herself hardly realizes the change in her circumstances, although her manner is always sweet and grateful. All that she cares for in life now, or almost thinks of, is that ghostly music which has become a necessary part of her being. All day long she sits and dreams of it in rapt ecstasy. She has almost ceased, during those long months which were void of any further manifestation, to hope for, or fear, any vision, or more personal communion with the dead. But that music, played by the spirit hand of him whom she mourns, is her very life.

And thus Christmas Eve again comes round, and finds Eunice by her old hearth, not quite so desolate and alone as a year ago, and not so sad or grieving. Instead of passing the day in bitter, hopeless weeping, she is filled with a strange tremor of expectancy. She insists on passing the day and evening utterly alone, absolutely refusing to allow him who is her friend—and in whom she has confided the singular mystic phenomena of the past year—to share her vigil.

A thrill of unutterable awe and terror passes over her, as she notes the dwindling daylight; but, mingled with the fear, there is an indefinite sense of hope. She feels as if *release* were at hand.

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She is oppressed by no stupor or drowsiness to-night as the hour grows late, but is painfully, vividly, alertly awake, every nerve tingling, every pulse throbbing wildly.

"Will *he* come?" she asks herself in feverish apprehension.

But, after all, it was in sleep she saw him last year, whether dream or vision; and she cannot sleep to-night, not if her life depended on it. She feels as if she could never sleep again!

She makes no pretence of occupation, but walks restlessly to and fro, stopping to listen every moment. The strain and tension of nerve and brain are horrible. She sometimes feels as if she had become suddenly deaf, and that the mightiest thunder-peal could not penetrate her dulled ear. Again the silence feels full of maddening, indefinite sound. . . . For three nights past she has not heard the phantom music, and she distracts herself wondering fearfully what its cessation presages.

Then she grows weary of the monotonous, restricted pacing, and sits down, with hands folded, in enforced quiet, while the terrible throbs of her heart seem to fill all the air around.

Again she starts to her feet, unable to sit still and bear the awful suspense of watching for she knows not what—of waiting for some mystic revelation from the unseen world.

But at last, as *the* hour draws near, she sinks into her easy-chair, her limbs suddenly collapsing, and refusing to support her from excess of nervous

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trembling; her lips white and bloodless; while her eyes, dilated unnaturally, seek the door and rest there. It is a large room, and decidedly a long one, in which she sits; and her chair near the hearth, and the doorway in the opposite end wall leave the whole space of shadowed room between—shadowed because her lamp, a reading one, though throwing a circle of brilliant light in a circumscribed radius, leaves the further and upper parts of the apartment in a sort of gloomy duskiness. Just outside that circle of shining light sits Eunice, gazing with fascinated eyes into the suggestive dimness.

. . . . . .

And now, slowly and solemnly, the clock in the roomy, deserted, tumble-down stables of the Manor House strikes twelve; and just as the last stroke dies away on the still air, and the sweet-toned bells of the old country church, half a mile off, clash forth in gladsome peal, announcing with triumphant joy the birth of another Christmas morning, the same loud, startling knock of a year ago resounds through the great echoing mansion. But not, as in her dream, is it followed by swiftly moving steps answering that imperious summons; no familiar footfall sounds upon the stair. Deathly silence follows that crash of sound; but still her eyes are riveted on the door. . . . And presently —slowly, noiselessly—it opens wide!

Into the space beyond her eyes glare wildly, and see—nothing! Yet, as she looks, it closes again softly, and she is conscious, with an instinc-

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tive, horrified thrill, of *a presence* in the room besides her own!

An irrepressible scream of terror rises to her lips, but is petrified, ere it finds utterance, by still greater awe.

Staring into that shadowed gloom, she sees nothing; and yet *something*—an impalpable, indefinable something—seems to be gathering form there,—a shadow, a degree deeper than the rest, a breath of icy air that sweeps across to her!

Paralysed with a fearful horror, she slips from her chair, and, crouching to the floor, shrinks back close to the wall behind, perhaps with a half-instinctive effort to gain the door that communicates with an inner room, and that is but a foot or two distant.

But as she moves, that awful something seems to move too! Is it but a wreathing vapour, or is it a gliding shape?

A long mirror fills the space between two of the three large windows—the space most distant from her. Across this the *thing* must pass as it advances, and she gazes in a trance of terror. What will she see reflected there? And, even as she looks, an awful formless grey mist seems to steal across the shining surface! . . . And still the air grows colder, and that terrible shadow in her room becomes denser and more tangible, as slowly, slowly, it glides ever onwards to the hearth.

And now it is there—a black, spectral, brooding, as yet indistinguishable form; but the human shape

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is evolving itself from that floating, awful vapour! And the fire burns dimly, and the light from the lamp, though clear, is bluish and ghastly; and gradually the shrouding mist appears to melt, and a human figure is revealed in the midst thereof—shadowy, unearthly, awful; a face livid, ashen; a face of the long-buried dead. And, once again, with her living, waking eyes, Eunice Beresford looks on the face of her father, Maxwell Beresford —gazes on that simulcrum of embodied death, which is yet but a phantom, a shade, as, through that awful form and ghastly corpse-like face, she can see the light and room beyond! And still she lives, still she crouches, with rigid muscles and fixed stony eyes, gazing in transfixed horror. . . . And the mist grows clearer that envelopes that terrible form, though still a sort of luminous haze palpitates around it, through which those great dark eyes now gleam with a shining, unearthly lustre. It is as if life suddenly entered that awful phantom of death—spirit-life, that is but an essence, and requires no substance for its dwelling-place.

Yes; more and more like the human creature, the father she knew and loved, that mystic shadow grows. Clearly defined now is the whole tall, stooping figure; distinct the noble head and snowy hair. And now the long, shadowy hands are moved and raised; and the cowering woman, who retains consciousness and life, as it were through some inscrutable mesmeric power that holds her spell-bound, sees that those spectral hands clasp

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a violin—or rather, the semblance of a violin, as it, too, is shadowy and wraith-like;—and once more that awful unearthly music reverberates through the room—now, as the voices of angels singing; again, as demons wrestling in despair!

And now *it*—*he*—that ghastly vision on her hearth, is playing a dirge-like, mysterious melody, the burthen of which is madness, despair, and death, laden with unutterable woe, full of wild, hopeless, inexplicable trouble. It suddenly changes into a rapid measure, weirdly horrible, morbidly terrible. The wondrous transitions and complex developments, shifting phases of beauty and deformity, might be likened to the phantasia of life itself—and played by a shadowy, spectral hand; by one who has passed out of life into the "great beyond;" a sublimity of awfulness is reached, which imagination fails to conceive.

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And the wretched woman, crouching on the floor, still hearkens with starting eyes, from which the reason has almost fled!

. . . . . .

And now all is silence again, and the shadow thickens once more round that unearthly figure. Formless, shapeless, it again grows, as it glides to where she cowers. . . . And from out that awful floating mist comes a voice; and yet it seems far off—so far!

"*Eunice,*" it says, "*I have come for you! I promised, and I have come! Take this token of my presence, and follow me!*"

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Something is pressed into her shrinking hands, and the terrible shadow floats onward to the door. There it pauses and vibrates, with a strange quivering motion; then for an instant it parts, and she sees again the face she loved, gazing back at her, with mournful, yearning eyes. The next instant all is vanished! The room is in darkness, profound, impenetrable, while the angry swirl of rain against the windows, and the low moaning of the wind are the only sounds that break the stillness.

. . . . . .

And the hours of the night creep away; and by-and-by, in the chill, late daylight of the Christmas morning, the maid who waits upon her, finds Eunice Beresford on her face, by that door communicating with the inner room—unconscious, but still breathing; while grasped between the stiffened fingers is *the missing violin!*

. . . . . .

For two days she remains thus, life being manifest only by the laboured, struggling breath; in all other respects she is as one already dead. The muscles never relax their grim clasp of the violin. Without force it could not be removed; and so it is left in the dying woman's hands. By-and-by, when death has supervened, and the rigid stage is passed, it will drop from the lifeless fingers, says the doctor.

And on the morning of the third day, before the late grey wintry dawn is born in the east, that terrible panting breath suddenly ceases, and all is still!

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The friend who had brought her from her obscure lodging back to the Manor House, which seems to have killed her with some wizard devilry, is present—has never left the house for a moment, night or day, since he was hastily summoned by the terrified housekeeper. He has got a skilled nurse from one of the great London hospitals; but he feels it is useless, that the hour has almost struck that will call the last of her race home. He feels an unending reproach in his breast that he had not remained at the Manor on Christmas Eve, despite her urgently expressed desire to be alone.

Tired and worn out with watching, anxiety, and nervous dread, he had dozed for a few minutes when the night is insensibly blending into day. Mrs. Hancock is there too, seated with her back to the bed, grieving, scared, alert; but she is slightly deaf, and notices not the cessation of that panting breath.

The nurse, who had been absent but for a few minutes, returns at this juncture. The strange, sudden silence strikes her; she moves quickly to the bed, and sees at a glance that all is over. And, mystery awful and terrifying, the *violin is gone!!* gone out of the dead woman's hands — vanished —a second time inexplicably! And never again is it seen by mortal man! . . . Has she brought it with her, as directed? . . . Or did *he* who gave it come for both? . . . None may say. All remains in darkness, profound, inscrutable.

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CHAPTER IV.

A PSYCHOLOGIST.

"WELL, gentlemen, it is nearly five-and-twenty years now since Eunice Beresford passed through that awful ordeal and the gate of death," continues Professor Dysart, the narrator of the preceding ghastly experience.

Arnold Dysart, Fellow of Cambridge, is a man who has travelled much and read immensely; whose mind runs in certain grooves—grooves bordering on the mystic line stretched between the real and ideal, between the natural and what men still call the supernatural. He is both poet and philosopher, dreamer and thinker, imaginist and scientist—a combination, apparently, of opposites; but the line of demarcation between the two is often so faintly traced, that we lose ourselves on that border-land, trying to define the exact point where idealism ends and philosophy begins; the dreamy, wild, impassioned soarings of the one merging almost insensibly into the consecrated calm, the sublime and lofty region of the other.

He lectures on modern philosophy in the

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University; but the subjects that lie really nearest his heart, in which he takes an untiring, unsleeping interest, are others than this.

He is somewhat of a theosophist, believing, to a certain extent, in the doctrine of metempsychosis, and the utter purification of man from all remaining earthly dross, by his being born again and yet again after this earthly life, ever more selfless, more etherealized, more spiritualized, until at last he is absorbed into the Deity from which all life emanates, and of which it is a part; each individual existence being but a ray, or throb, of that great central Divine Life that is the universe and God in one, and back into which great sun of life these tiny radiating sparks must be again absorbed, when loosed from the fleshly trammels that have held them prisoners for a little space.

Such, at least, is the doctrine of "Buddha." And the votaries of "Esoteric Buddhism"—who are so numerous in our midst, growing quite a power in our land; whether for good or ill, of course, it remains to be determined—teach, we believe, much the same theories, only, perhaps, incorporated with others still more startling and difficult of conception.

There are fashions in religion, we know, as well as in all other things in this sad, bad world; and the present day is peculiarly ripe in originating "fads"—for, in truth, they are little else.

Some one starts an idea more or less novel, original, startling, if possible, whether in morals

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or religion, and there is immediately a crowd of worshippers — or perhaps, rather, "would-be initiates" is the better term. The originator is the hero or heroine of the hour, and they at once feel themselves apostles of the new light; preaching a crusade against the superstitious darkness that still wraps most of the world. But thank Heaven for the gloom that shuts our eyes to those will-o'-the-wisps that dance over the marsh and morass, and are soon engulfed therein; and thank Heaven still more for the light that is from above, that is in our hearts—"the light of the world" that "passeth not away;" and he that followeth that light "shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

But, to return to Professor Dysart; he is a student of occultism, and takes an ardent interest in all psychical phenomena, whether they take the form of singular dreams, presentiments, coincidences, hypnotism, thought transference, etc.; in fact, "will-power" of any or all kinds; holding the rather peculiar doctrine, which he is fond of promulgating in the words of some modern writer, "that the power of will and the principle of life are fundamentally identical; and he who can control his own will, becomes thereby able to direct the currents of life within his own organism, and to transfer them upon others for the purpose of giving health, strength, etc. Also," he will continue, still quoting the same author, "it is believed that those who have obtained the power

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to control their own thoughts, may thereby become able to read the thoughts of others; because the mental images created by the latter become reflected and mirrored in the minds of those whose souls are tranquil, and such images may enter their consciousness."

He has faith in the power of will distant in life, and also in the power of will distant in death! He holds the belief, that though the body be dead, yet that the spirit of thought, the very essence of life itself, still has being somewhere, and can influence living minds, possibly even more forcibly than when that liberated will was encased in flesh itself; and also he believes that in sleep the soul sometimes escapes, and leads a dual life—a theory that would account for many strange, inexplicable impressions, and seems as mystical as it is marvellous.

But, in spite of his being so very advanced a thinker and enthusiastic psychologist, there is nothing at all terrible or mysterious about Arnold Dysart. He is a tall slightly-built man, with a pale, thoughtful, worn face, but with the kindest eyes and sweetest smile imaginable, and with a manner as kind as are his eyes.

The two gentlemen to whom he has just read the foregoing singular and most weird story are old and valued college friends, whose bent of mind and thought are not very unlike his own.

The younger, Cyril Raymond, is a clergyman, and somewhat of a visionary enthusiast, dreamy

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and spiritual; while the other, Harvard Fenton, is a barrister of brilliant renown, famous in the conduct of great criminal cases, and whose persuasive, fervid eloquence, when retained for the defence, almost inevitably turns the scale of popular sympathy; and the accused, who had seemed wrapped in garments of an inky darkness, suddenly issues forth from beneath that cleansing stream of sparkling, impressive oratory, pure and white as an angel's wing.

For besides possessing a clear, logical, forensic mind, there is a strong vein of poetry and idealism in Fenton's mental nature, and the two united combine to make him one of the very first counsel of the day.

"My father, who made the notes from which I elaborated the horrible story I have just read to you," continues the Professor, after a short pause, "was an old and intimate friend of Maxwell Beresford's, although many years his junior; in fact, he was the friend to whom I allude in the tale. Eunice he had known well in her girlhood, but during the last twenty years of her life he had seen very little of her, being almost constantly absent from England; and it was owing to this fact that he was unaware of old Beresford's death, and his daughter's sad change of circumstances. When he did return, he at once sought her out. It was he who effected her return to the old Manor House, the home of her race. He did all he could for her, seeking to rouse her out of

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the singular absorbed, apathetic, and yet at the same time, unnaturally exalted, frame of mind which had become normal with her; but to no purpose. She was too utterly withdrawn into the visionary world ever really to belong to the things of earth again; the 'Hidden Life' had opened its mystic doors a little way to her dazed, yearning eyes, and she only waited for it to open wider still, when she might cross those shadowy portals, and know what lies beyond.

"It was just two months before the end that my father met her again. He was one of those to whom I allude in the little preface to my sketch as having heard the mysterious music; Mrs. Hancock, the housekeeper, was the other.

"Eunice told him everything, and though rapt, dreamy, ecstatic, she was sane as I am.

"On that last terrible Christmas Eve he urged her strongly either to come to his hotel or allow him to be with her at the Manor, but she refused to hearken to either proposal. She felt, she declared, that some added revelation would be made to her from the unseen world, and that if her father did come for her, she desired to be alone to meet him. And so she passed through that awful experience in self-elected solitude."

"Yes, Dysart, it's very horrible; indeed, the most ghastly thing I ever heard," says Fenton. "And this extraordinary narrative of yours impresses one peculiarly, owing to one's having such undoubted testimony of its absolute authenticity.

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But you say in the preface that the unfortunate lady lived to tell the horror of that last night, whilst in the story, as you have written it, she never recovers consciousness. How is that?"

"My dear Fenton, ever practical—which, I suppose, is the natural outcome of the legal mind. A lawyer's 'occupation's gone' if he may not ask the 'how' and 'why'—eh, Raymond?"—glancing at the clergyman with a smile, who is sunk in profound reverie upon the mystical tale just concluded. "I made that slight departure from the actual, merely for the sake of dramatic effect. Two days after that awful night, Eunice recovered speech and consciousness, and, though evidently dying, her mind was clear. She sent for my father, who had never left the house, and told him all. He was inclined to think that she was the victim, either of hallucination, or some monstrously clever trick, although he had heard that phantom music with his own ears, although with his own eyes he now gazed on the restored violin. The grasp that had clutched it so firmly as to defy its being removed without force had relaxed with renewed consciousness, but she would not allow it to be touched; it lay on the bed beside her, just where her hand could rest on it, and it was thus she told the ghastly sequel of her tale to my father.

"For two or three days she remained in this state—weak, panting, conscious, but with the dying eyes ever fixed as on some unseen presence. It was a strange and awful experience, my father

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said, to see her as she lay thus, waiting for the prison bars to burst, that she might go free; yet, even while still caged, looking on the road she was about to travel.

"During all those days my father never left the Manor; and I, a boy of thirteen or so, remember well tremblingly crawling to that dreaded door and gazing in with awed, horror-struck eyes at that mysterious wizard violin, and the pale, drawn, visionary face upon the pillow. Even to my child's understanding I knew she gazed on what was not visible to mortal eyes, and I shrank away, shuddering and terrified.

"Then, by degrees, she sank again into the state of torpor or insensibility that first held her, body and brain apparently paralyzed, and life only evident by the struggling breath; her last conscious act being once again to clasp the violin to her heart.

"Thus she remained for forty-eight hours, and then came the end, exactly as I have written it.

"My father had dozed but for a few minutes, in the chill early dawn, when the nurse's exclamation roused him. The laboured breath had ceased. He started to his feet, and saw that Eunice's spirit had fled and the violin with it, and, strong man as he was, the awe of so weird a manifestation almost overcame him.

"Then, after a little, he grew again to think that possibly the whole eerie marvel was the result of some diabolical trickery, practised for some un-

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imagined sinful end—possibly to rid the Manor House of inhabitants; and, with this view, he determined to have it thoroughly and systematically searched."

"Yes," speaks Fenton, again interpolating, "that would be a most natural solution for him to arrive at, save that the first manifestation was made in the lodging which Miss Beresford occupied in Westerham; it was there the violin disappeared, so how would that account for——"

"My dear fellow, you are rational and logical, of course; but a man, after going through such an experience as my father just had, is not quite so cool-headed; he felt he must unravel the mystery by which they seemed to be surrounded, or at least make some attempt to solve the weird problem, and the first thing that suggested itself to his half-dazed brain was to examine the servants, and search the great old rambling house. The first step did not take long; they were but two or three in number, faithful old retainers, who had loved and honoured the last of the Beresfords, and mourned her dead deeply and sincerely.

"They and my father both knew that the house had the reputation of being haunted; that there was an old story or legend attached to it, of a murder having been wrought somewhere under that many gabled roof, in days long past and gone, and that the spirit of the guilty creature could not rest, but constantly revisited the scene of her crime.

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"Strange and unaccountable sounds were reported at long intervals, as proceeding from that disused east wing; but in the last generation or two they had been heard but seldom, and the restless phantom who, if tradition were to be believed, had intruded her unwished-for presence at all inopportune times and seasons upon her ungrateful descendants, left these two, the last of the line, in peace.

"Superstition said that her actual appearance always boded ill to the house of Beresford; but she was seen so often during the lifetime of the late squire's grandfather—the last baronet—all the evil almost that could be wrought following in her train, that I suppose that is the reason she left these two last representatives of the race unvisited.

"To Eunice, at least, that shadowy *she* was nothing but a name, and my father said that she seemed to attach no importance whatever to the legend. Of course, up to that date, this wild tale of a haunting presence had never been actually verified; and these things are so very generally only folly. Some absurdity is started, originally, perhaps, but in jest, or by some ignorant, superstitious folk, whose crazed fancies are not worthy of the slightest regard by sane people; but the thing grows and grows, and in the end assumes giant proportions, man, on the whole, being so credulous an animal.

"But tradition in this instance spoke truth, apparently. And that strange, weird story of a

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past sin, and an abiding shadow ever brooding over the house of Beresford, was to be confirmed in a singular and startling manner. In fact, there is so strong an air of exaggerated mysticism about the sequel of my story, that I almost fear you two will fancy I am drawing on my imagination."

"No, Dysart, we shan't; say on," says Cyril Raymond, with rapt, dreamy eyes fixed intently on the Professor's face. "For my part," he continues earnestly, "I believe that man knows little as yet of the mysteries that surround him, and especially little of the greatest mystery of all, his own thinking self. 'The highest study of mankind is man,' we are told; but I should word it differently, and say, 'The highest and most important study of mankind is the *brain* of man.'

"Amongst all the marvels of creation, the wondrous works of the Infinite, *it*—that small portion of white and grey thinking stuff in each human head—is the acme, the crown, the very apex. It is a mystery ungraspable by the most learned. Man has wrested many strange secrets from Nature's storehouse, but of the most terrible secret of all, that awful mystery of his own being, he knows absolutely nothing.

"Of late, certainly, he has begun to recognize this ignorance, and to make little abortive attempts to render it less profound; but what has he discovered as yet? Nothing, except the startling depth of his want of knowledge.

"He is on the threshold of the most marvellous

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mine of mysteries that the world holds, but he has not yet crossed it. When he does—as doubtless he will by-and-by, when the time is ripe—stepping even ever so little a way within that mystic chamber, he will know that what we call wonderful, mysterious, weird, supernatural, arises only from certain conditions of that complex, extraordinary, wizard organism, in peculiar temperaments, where the body is subordinate to that mighty magician, the brain, and that——"

"Raymond, my friend, shut up! If once we let you mount your peculiar hobby, you'll be sure to ride full tilt, and will 'let nothing you dismay,' laughs Fenton good-humouredly, who knows the clergyman's weakness for this one absorbing subject. "Let the Professor finish his horrors, and then you can treat us to a dissertation on the brain, if you feel disposed; though, I fear, between Dysart's *diablerie* and your metaphysics, *my* poor 'thinking stuff' will be *ex curia* to-morrow, and I shall lose my case. Go on, Arnold, like a good fellow, and I'll engage to keep this enthusiast in order."

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CHAPTER V.

THE DISCOVERY.

THUS adjured, the Professor continues :—

"That day my father did nothing; he was too thoroughly shaken for action of any kind, besides feeling that there would be a sort of want of reverence for the newly dead to institute anything of a regular search immediately.

"He felt really grieved for Eunice, the woman that he remembered so well as a child, and as a bright, beautiful girl; and mingled with his sorrow were both horror and awe at the manner of her death, and its attendant incomprehensible circumstances. So through that day he grieved and pondered, determining to do all that lay in his power to clear up the mystery on the morrow.

"But before the morrow came, there was still another little link of mystery added to the chain that had already grown so strong and was so binding.

"When the night and sleep and silence fell on the Manor House, my father, tossing in restless wakefulness on his bed, with a dim sense of an

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unearthly presence brooding somewhere beneath that wide old roof, heard clearly, yet faint and low, as if coming from a great distance, the vibrating notes of the spectral violin! At first he thought that his senses must be deceiving him. He sprang up and listened intently at the door of his room, while a strange supernatural awe grew strong upon him.

"That mystic music had been silent for many days; yet now, once again, those phantom strains breathed, as it were, low amongst the rafters of the Manor roof.

"The weird sounds no longer appeared to proceed from any portion of the great rambling old house in the neighbourhood of the rooms Eunice had occupied, but stole, and crept, and sighed, away far up above one's head, away in some distant, remote, untenanted region of the old dwelling. And as my father stood and hearkened, rooted to the spot, as if by some singular magnetic power, he seemed to know instinctively that they proceeded from that lonely east wing, that desolate gable which tradition pointed to as the scene of the murder in the Long Ago.

. . . . . .

"How strange and wild and unearthly seemed that mysterious harmony! Where did it come from, and who was the player? The very nature of the music seemed to declare its supernatural character; the distance it appeared to travel seemed so vast, with numberless closed and locked doors

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shutting it off and off; and yet the sounds, as they reached the ear, though low, were intensely, vibratingly clear.

"And through the hours of darkness the ghostly strains sighed and sobbed and plained in eerie lament through that haunted gable, and my father lay and listened; but, brave man as he was, he had not courage to trace it to its source.

. . . . . .

"With the reassuring daylight returned both courage and unbelief in larger measure than before. That it was some devilish trickery, he felt convinced; and if cunning or conjuring had devised or perpetrated the previous horrors—horrors that had compassed the death of poor helpless Eunice—why, this last little bit of simple jugglery would be but child's play.

"And, with this conviction, he organized a proper and efficient searching party, numbering in its ranks of half a dozen or so a police officer, as representing the power of the law.

"But the latter's impressiveness was quite thrown away; no delinquent was discovered who would shrink appalled by the awful authority of the 'man in blue;' no one, or nothing that could be arrested, prosecuted, and punished, was found beneath the Manor House roof. A few scurrying, belated rats; a timorous, peeping mouse or two; aggressive, bloated spiders,—these alone held the fortress of the eastern gable.

"And now to continue in my father's very words,

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for he wrote out a minute account of this day's proceedings; though the notes from which I wrote Eunice's story, and these papers I now hold in my hand, were not discovered by me till less than a year ago, in a secret drawer of my poor father's writing-table:—

Nothing else, either earthly or unearthly, was to be seen, no strange music to be heard. The undisturbed dust of ages lay thick upon these lone, drear passages and echoing staircases; dust so dense, as almost to form a carpet for the foot, and which was proof incontrovertible that no human presence had penetrated this haunted gable, to practice wizardry of any sort.

How eerie and terrible now to think of that midnight music! How impossible almost to realize it, and still more the ghastly, awful facts of the last week or two!

That mystic violin—where was it? *What* was it? Could it be that *she*, that haunting spirit of evil, whose phantom presence was said to dwell in this shunned east wing, had entered it, and spoke in the weird music of its wailing breath?

Yes, it was a violin bewitched; or rather, that beloved old Straduarius of poor Maxwell Beresford's had become possessed by the lost soul of *her* to whom tradition pointed as the sinful, ever-brooding shadow of the house; it was co-existent with her, and now they were one.

I know not what wild, fantastic thoughts took

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vivid hold upon me as, after exhaustively searching every part of that strange, eccentric old gable, we stood at last within the room at its remotest end—the room reputed to be the scene of the tragedy in the olden time.

The threshold evidently had not been crossed for a great number of years; possibly a century and more had elapsed since any one stood within these mouldering walls. And it was this fact, I thought at first, that accounted for the strange stifling sense of oppression that struck me with a queer foreboding chill of dread expectancy.

. . . . . .

It seemed to my excited imagination as if this room we now had entered was surcharged with some subtle influence—was dominated by some invisible presence. . . . I had felt nothing of this in those many other rooms and passages and stairways; and this impalpable influence appeared to reveal to my quickened senses that a clue to some mystery was at hand. . . . I looked about me in vague bewilderment. . . . I felt strange, odd, unlike myself, as if drawn to some hidden end by some invisible force. . . . I verily believe I was the subject of some sort of weird mesmerism, emanating from the long dead will that reigned in that desolate chamber.

. . . . . .

I looked round on those that accompanied me; they were unmoved, unaffected; they felt no unseen presence in the air; the room held for them nothing

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but dust and decay. I bade them leave me; my voice sounded strange and distant. I seemed to speak and move as one who was locked in some paralyzing dream.

When they were gone, I moved across the room with mechanical steps, as if guided by some unseen hand. . . . It contained three or four pieces of very ancient crumbling furniture; one was a sort of old-world bureau, an article with numberless drawers. To this I went direct, without hesitation. What did I expect to find? I did not know. I had no thought in the matter. All I did was automatic. I moved and acted without volition of my own. A sort of numbness, as it were, bound my faculties. I was a machine, not a man. Of course, I do not insist that all this was so; it may have been only some extraordinary phase of an overwrought imagination, and that I only fancied I was influenced.

But though I moved to the bureau with such strange directness, the great number of the drawers seemed to puzzle me, and for a minute or two I stood uncertain. I opened two or three haphazard, and gazed vaguely into blank nothingness. . . . But still no faintest gleam of knowledge of what I sought was borne in upon me.

. . . . . .

Then suddenly that same strange *influence* seemed to guide my hand that had directed my steps, and I turned away from all those multitudinous brass-knobbed drawers that faced me

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like unsolved enigmas—away to a tiny, obscure one in the left-hand corner, at the very top, almost hidden beneath the overhanging edge of the heavy old-fashioned piece of furniture.

It was locked; but the wood was rotting, and at my second rather vigorous pull the lock gave way.

I drew out the drawer, but it was empty, like the others, dust of many, many days, that had rolled itself gradually into soft, woolly, fluffy balls and oblongs being its only contents. Still I drew it out to its entire length. It was long, narrow, shallow, but nothing lay concealed within. . . . Yet still my hand and eye seemed riveted to it, and I felt compelled to do what I then did; and that was to remove the drawer altogether from its groove, and scan the empty space at the back.

I did so, but could see nothing, the place was so confined and dark; but, inserting my hand, I felt suddenly and convincingly that I had at last found what I had been blindly forced to seek. The drawer was strangely shallow—shallower much than its outside appearance led one to suppose—and in the vacant, unsuspected space thus gained my hand closed on a long slight roll of paper.

With a strange feeling of standing on the brink of some added mystery, I drew it forth and gazed on it half fearfully.

The paper was yellow and stained and brittle with age; it was tied round with a somewhat broad band of rich satin ribbon, that had been

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doubtless once a neck-ribbon and bright-coloured, but from the same cause as the paper, it had faded to a sickly neutral tint; and lastly, the characters traced upon the outside of this somewhat flat roll of paper had become so faint, though of a reddish hue, as to be scarcely legible. But I carried it to the wide old casement window, my heart beating thickly, while a strange tremor of expectation thrilled me, and after a little I deciphered the following singular inscription—or rather, inscriptions, as there was writing on both sides of the small scroll.

"The Last *Will* and Prophetic Curse of Dorothea Eleanor Beresford, written and signed *with her blood* this day, April 27, 1687."

And on the other side—

"When he who in the far distant future shall find this paper first holds it in his hands, the final vengeance of the prophecy herein writ with my own hand, the curse that I lay upon the house of Beresford, will have begun to work."

With trembling, eager, and yet shrinking hands, I opened this document so strangely inscribed. All the feeling of mechanical action that had been so strong upon me had vanished; the subtle influence that had seemed to dominate and guide me had disappeared, leaving me as usual, only nervous and somewhat shaken.

Just as I had untied the fatal binding ribbon the search-party returned for me, and to say that there was now no corner of that eastern gable

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unexplored. So I told them to return to the inhabited part of the house, and that I should soon follow.

Yet I will confess that as I listened to their retreating footsteps, a slight feeling of apprehensive dread came over me for a moment; but I conquered it, and opened the strange secret I had disentombed.

The writing of the inner portion of the manuscript was much less faint and shadowy than the outer, and I should have read it with comparative ease, but for the odd, thin, spidery character of the handwriting, combined with unfamiliar, old-world spelling, which I shall not attempt to transcribe.

This singular mysterious document ran thus :—

"I, Dorothea Eleanor Beresford, wife of Sir Hugh John Beresford, Squire of Deep-Dell Manor, and master of the wide vast Manor lands, in the parish of Cotham, barony of Kingswood, county of Daleshire, and within five miles of the city of Westerham, being a hopeless prisoner in this terrible chamber, and sentenced to the slow agony of death from starvation, by my aforesaid husband, Hugh John Beresford, as the reward and punishment for my crimes—first, my betrayal of himself; and, secondly, my murder of my lover in this very room, on believing him false to me, owing to the deliberate misrepresentations of my treacherous husband—do hereby declare that I leave the curse of my undying, vengeful spirit upon the house of

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Beresford; and do solemnly now prophecy, being of sound mind and clear understanding, the evil that will be in the latter days, when I and my time and times are forgotten, or are remembered but as a wild and baseless legend.

"The cloud shall gather slowly—very slowly, over this house that is my murderer, and to which I am an alien, although I bear its name, which I have dishonoured. Slowly, but surely, it shall darken on all sides. Money and lands, honour and title shall all go, one by one; and then, at last, the race shall die out too. And *this* is the time I choose for my final vengeance.

"The last of the House of Beresford will be a woman, lovely, and pure, and good, and sorrow-stricken. She shall live on till long past her shadowed youth, and she shall die when the chill breath of life's autumn begins to blow—die horribly, as if by witchcraft. The magic of the dead shall slay her; and *then* will the time of my vengeance be ripe.

"She will die and be buried, but she shall come again. Aye! in sooth, again; though none will guess, not even she herself, of this mystery and curse that I now foretell, and say shall be.

"She shall come again, lovelier even than before, with the beauty that lures men; and *my* spirit shall dwell in her, and she shall be false and wicked; crime shall she do, even as I have done. And when the measure of my guilt is doubled even in her, when the tragedy that these walls have seen is

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reproduced in dual shape in those distant days—then, and not till then, will the cup of my revenge be full, and at last I shall rest!

"I see it all with my dying eyes. I look into the future, and read it as if it were a book.

"Let none, forsooth, say hereafter Mistress Beresford died mad, and these are the ravings of one who perisheth with hunger and remorse for her crimes.

"I have no remorse, save for him whom I slew in my haste and hot wrath, believing him false. I would that I had slain him who now slayeth me; but my vengeance will be sure and full.

"And, behold! I will give this one sign in the fulness of time, that he who reads may know my words are about to be accomplished:—

"Let him who hears the music—not of earth—sound from the eastern gable, the music of the violin (*his* hated violin), take heed, and know that the end is at hand, and the prophecy about to be fulfilled!"

. . . . . .

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CHAPTER VI.

WHAT WAS IT?

SUCH were the exact words of this most extraordinary and mysterious document that I had become so strangely possessed of.

I lost all count of time as I stood there, reading over and over again that eerie, startling prediction. The paper seemed to have a magnetic, horrible attraction for me. Of course it was all nonsense—wild, absurd rhapsody; the malevolent delirium of a brain strained to snapping-point by the weight of its own guilt, and the deadly, cruel, lingering nature of the punishment meted out.

What barbaric times they were in which that sinful Dorothea lived! When a husband could condemn a wife to—and carry out unmolested—so horrible a sentence, even though she had been wicked, superlatively wicked; even though she had, in a mad fit of ungovernable rage, taken a life. . . . Still, a prisoner in this room, shut out from all possible means of escape—as the gulf below that decaying old casement was shudderingly deep—condemned to slow starvation; a

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woman, doubtless, young and strong and beautiful, with the life currents coursing like wine in her veins, to die thus, like a rat in a trap;—*did* she wait for that awful, agonizing death to steal upon her pang by pang? or did she add another to the black record of her crimes, and escape by the one door still left open to her—suicide? . . . History said not.

But even as the thought came over me, a breath of icy air seemed to sweep through the room, though the window was close shut and the weather wonderfully mild for December; and as I shivered, and glanced round with a sudden unspeakable dread, my ears caught, as it were, a faint rustling sound, and then, in a moment, *something* seemed to pass me by, close—quite close, for I felt the air fanned by that mystic presence, though my straining eyes saw nothing, and gazed but on vacancy. . . . Yet *it* was there near me—quite near, horribly near—for an instant, that invisible, formless, soundless presence. And then, in another moment, I knew I was alone again. . . . And, with the blood beating in my ears like the piston of a steam-engine, while a cold sweat of deadly terror burst on my brow, I stumbled from the room, still clutching that strange long-concealed paper in my trembling hands. . . . With faltering, uneven footsteps I made my way back, rapidly as possible, to the inhabited part of the Manor, almost losing myself among those singularly intricate, winding curves and passages and stairways, that puzzled and

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distracted me in that first inexplicable rush of ghastly fright, making me irrationally feel as if I were caught in a maze of unearthly terror. And as I went, . . . suddenly there was borne to my ear, faint and low, but yet distinct and clear, the vibrating notes of the mystic violin! . . . Yes, away there behind me, in that farthest point of the eastern gable, sigh'd and wailed those phantom eerie strains!

. . . . . .

The short December daylight was swiftly waning as I gained the occupied portion of the house. I had been hours, though I knew it not, in that lone east wing, and now, with the growing dusk, that weird music filled me with inexpressible awe.

What inscrutable mystery was hidden beneath the roof-tree of the gray old Manor? I asked myself, as I approached the death-chamber, longing, yet half dreading to look once more on the sad, sweet face of Eunice Beresford, locked in the calm of its eternal repose.

But I need have had no fear; there had been no occult change in the dead. All was the same as when I last stood within the room in the early morning hours.

But as I gazed on that rigid, motionless form, hoping that the awful calm which always seems to reign in the presence of that dread, mysterious visitant might soothe and quiet my over-wrought nerves, the extraordinary realization of a portion—

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the earlier portion—of that weird, mystic prophecy I had that day discovered struck me with the force of a blow.

If but a coincidence, how tragically singular! The pomp and wealth and state of the house of Beresford had indeed departed. The baronetcy was now a thing of the past; the wide-stretching manorial lands had become alienated from the family; and the late proprietor's spendthrift grandfather, the last baronet, who had dishonoured and forfeited the title, had poured out money like water, leaving little more to his successor than the heritage of the old name, and a pile of mortgages.

Maxwell's father made a great effort to pay off some of these latter, almost swamped himself in the attempt, gave up struggling against adverse fate, drifted with the tide, and passed away, to make room in turn for his son—room in a house that could no longer be called their own, and with the small portion of the estate that remained to them mortgaged up to the hall-door. And when old Maxwell's time came, and he passed to "where, beyond these voices, there is peace," the race was virtually extinct.

He, the only son of an only son, had for his only child a daughter, and when she died unwed, the name and family of Beresford died too; the house and lands passed into the possession of strangers, and that singular prophecy was thus oddly fulfilled.

And were there not other and even more start-

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ling realizations of that hidden eerie writing? Had not Eunice's death been strange and mysterious? Had it not in some way been compassed or brought about, either by actual mystic contact with the dead, or else by an awful, inexplicable force or influence, some extraordinary *magnetism*, exercised by the dead, yet still *living*, *will* of that unknown guilty Dorothea?

Her body had been dust for centuries, but the thinking spirit, the mind,—that wondrous pervading, dominating, mysterious essence, force, power—call it what you will,—that exists in us all, and that really is *the* man or woman, apart from the poor decaying body; that mystic something that has share with the Infinite, being bounded by none of the finite laws that chain and cramp the physical nature; that possesses unlimited, immeasurable potentialities, and that is proof stronger than aught else we have of our immortality and kinship with the divine;—that occult *will-power* of Dorothea Beresford still had existence somewhere! Had I not had proof of it a while ago in that distant terrible room?

And *it*, that indefinable, potent *it*, had foretold the manner of Eunice's death; foretold it while it was still shrouded in the misty, far-away future; and now it had come to pass.

Would—could the horrible supernatural sequel to that prophetic curse be wrought? I asked myself in dazed bewilderment, as the whole weird story appeared to spread itself out before me like

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a map, while I still stood in the silent presence of *her*, who seemed to have acquired suddenly a mystic individuality.

. . . . . .

And then again my thoughts reverted to that awful violin!

What was it?

Surely not a mere violin, nearly two hundred years old. Its actual history was strange; it seemed to have played a somewhat prominent part in the fortunes of the family to whom it belonged, being the favourite instrument, tradition said, of that stern, relentless, betrayed husband, who had loved devotedly till he found his love was outraged.

But it must have had some eerie dual life. It was a "familiar," an independent spirit, a creature! A lost, despairing soul was caged in its musical heart. It was *her* familiar—Dorothea's; she bent it to her will.

That strange, weird Cremona had come down as an heirloom in the Beresford family; but it had disappeared with them! Its earthly mission was fulfilled when they ceased to be; and now, *she*—that mysterious *she*—had possessed herself of it, to aid her in the spell of her demoniacal enchantments.

. . . . . .

I think, verily, my mind was a little unhinged by my late gruesome experience, or I should not have perpetrated the folly of indulging in such ultra-wild imaginings. But the ordeal I had gone

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through in that desolate east wing had really tried me severely, and I could not shake off the effects for some time.

And even when my nerves did get tolerably calm, and I endeavoured to think out the whole singular mystery rationally and cohesively, I could arrive at no conclusion, but that some strange esoteric influence brooded over the house, in some way connected with that spirit of evil that had lived and died so horribly in the flesh beneath its roof in the long ago.

What that influence was I could not tell; unless some unsuspected phantom form of mesmerism—mesmeric power, exercised on living men by certain strong, peculiarly organized mental natures, whom death has claimed for its own, but whose subduing, dominant *will-power* remains active, eternal, unconquerable; a power, or force, that may be disseminated widely, although the world—even the scientific world—acknowledges it not, and may exercise—rarely consciously—in numberless cases, an unconscious, vital, supremely potent influence on the lives of those whose temperament renders them especially receptive of the magnetic current, whether emanating from the living or the dead; and who may be thus moulded by an invisible, unimagined force, working silently, mysteriously at the heart of their being—moulded for good or ill!

And possibly in this astounding problem which suddenly presented itself to me, in this dark and

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fearful enigma, might be discovered by him who held the key to the mystery a clue to much of the crime and sin and sorrow of the world that seems so greatly unaccountable!

. . . . . .

"My father's narrative ends abruptly with these reflections," continues Professor Dysart, folding up the papers in his hands, and looking earnestly at the two men, who have listened with such profound attention to the strange sequel of his story—"reflections that embody ideas which doubtless many will consider little short of the ravings of a madman, and would excuse in the present instance as being only wild, exaggerated fancies, engendered by the strange horror he had gone through. But I am inclined myself to think that there is more in that startling idea of the minds of the dead being still active, living, influencing media in our earthly life, unknown, unsuspected by us, than our psychological science yet recognizes. Of course, I mean rare and peculiarly organized minds —minds that had the mesmeric power largely developed in life."

"Does it not recognize psychomachy?" says the barrister, with somewhat of a mocking smile; "at least, I think I have seen some such big, impressive word somewhere; and, doubtless, the conflict understood in that terribly high-sounding term means that between a distant-in-death dominating spirit and some poor living victim that writhes in its unnatural bonds, but can't escape."

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"Ah, Fenton," retorts the Professor, with a remonstrating head-shake, "I fear you are a hopeless scoffer, and that your conversion is beyond my skill! Your rationalism—or, perhaps, I should rather say, materialism—must be indeed of a pronounced order if you are still unbelieving of psychical phenomena after the——"

"Don't mind him, Dysart," interrupts Cyril Raymond eagerly. "He only assumes that *rôle* to disguise the real depth of his conviction. No man could listen to so startling a revelation of a weird, mystical agency, influencing human life in so terrible a degree, without being greatly impressed. It has always been a theory of mine that the human mind does not die when the man dies. We bury the brain, certainly, with the body, and it becomes dust with the rest; but that is the physical mind, that has corporeity in the head; but the immaterial, divine spirit of that mind, the condensed, sublimated essence of the man's being, has surely separate existence. The soul is the immortal part of man, indestructible, unseen, eternal; but may it not also be the spirituality of his mind? It is hard not to think that the soul has kinship close and inseparable with the intellect, the imagination, the higher nature, that seems to have so little in common with materialism of any kind. I suppose it is the humanity so strong within us," continues the clergyman deprecatingly, "that cries out for a continuance of this mental life in the future state; that clings frantically to the idea of

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eternal *mind*-life, as well as soul. The body *must* become dust; but the thinking spirit surely has an existence apart from the breath."

"Yes," speaks the Professor, with thoughtful accent, "it is hard, so terribly hard, to believe that those great and glorious intellects that shed a lustre on the earth from time to time, and those lesser mind-lights—inferior to those giant ones, and yet how brilliant—that illumine each generation here and there, become extinct at death, and are not for evermore; that there is no 'progression' through the countless ages; that intellectuality is at a standstill for everlasting."

"How pleasant is the *Swedenborgian* theory!" remarks Harvard Fenton, catching for a moment the dreamy spirit of the other two. "How delightful if one could think that it shadowed forth, even ever so remotely, the life of the world to come—an ennobled, purified, incorruptible, perfected life—but still life, wonderfully like this in its *mental* developments."

"The fact is," answers the clergyman softly, with a distant, rapt look in his dark, earnest eyes, "we are too grossly earthly while clogged with these bonds of flesh to understand, to comprehend even dimly, the divine beatitude of a redeemed spirit admitted into the Eternal Presence, and permitted to join in the celestial choir. Such unimaginable, ineffable bliss is beyond and above our dull, finite comprehensions; and we try to clutch at any simulacrum of the only state of existence that we know."

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CHAPTER VII.

AN *OPEN* COFFIN!

AFTER a slight pause Fenton questions the Professor as to what further steps his father took to sift the Manor House mystery.

"Surely he did not let it rest there. Did he not seek more strenuously to solve that strange enigma—a puzzle that must have meant but clever conjuring?" he continues energetically. "Of course, there was no real value to be attached to that hidden paper, purporting to be a prophecy; the realization of its sinister words were, it must be admitted, a series of marvellous coincidences, but nothing more, believe me. Nothing would persuade me to the contrary. And I think, Arnold, old friend, you could not have a better proof that the whole weird history may be read by the light of singular coincidence and jugglery combined, than that five-and-twenty years, as you tell us yourself, have passed away since Miss Beresford's mysterious death; and all those long years she is quietly sleeping in her grave, and the great and crowning acme of that dread, prophetic curse,—the

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point where wizardry steps in and declares that the limitations of the range of man's understanding shall be passed, the natural laws by which humanity is governed set at nought and defied—that life and death, in short, will become exchangeable terms—remains still unfulfilled. Eunice Beresford sleeps the sleep that knows no waking, and has not returned in sinful guise to earth, as the prophecy foretold."

"I know not whether she sleeps or wakes," responds the Professor, softly and very gravely, with a sudden shade of mingled reverence and doubt in his tones. "The last and almost strangest incident in this mystic, terrible story remains to be told. I don't blame you for being sceptical, Harvard; it all seems so horrible and unearthly. But we know little, as yet, of *will-power*, whether in life or death, and certainly not enough to say dogmatically such and such phenomena cannot be. Doubtless, what we call phenomena now, as Cyril said a while ago, will be looked upon as quite commonplace and matter-of-course in the later ages of the world.

"But to return to what remains as yet the last, and, I think, *unfinished* chapter in this unique and startling history.

"A week subsequent to the events I have related, Eunice Beresford was interred in the family vault of the Beresfords, in the graveyard of the old church, scarcely more than half a mile from the Manor. Many Beresfords slept their last sleep in

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that gloomy chamber, but still it was not full. There was room for more, only there are none to fill it.

"Poor Maxwell's coffin looked painfully fresh when his daughter's was carried in and laid beside it. Only two years since, that time-sealing gateway had harshly grated open to receive him—that gate which none who enter as inmates may recross, we are told. And yet——

"On leaving the vault my father, who was chief, and, indeed, only mourner, noticed that something was slightly wrong with the gate; it would not quite close, and so could not be padlocked. He gave directions to have it put in order, and a few days later left Westerham, aged and decidedly broken in health by the maze of horror and mystery in which he had taken so prominent a part.

"That *he* should have been appointed to find that document, the existence of which none had dreamt of through all those long, long years—for so he regarded the singular compelling power that seemed to force him to its discovery—he looked upon, in his then nervous state, as in some way ominous or foreshadowing that he was either to make some fresh discovery, or be involved in some future complication of the not yet ended tragedy.

"He guarded that mysterious paper carefully, but kept it a secret locked in his own breast. He told none of what he had found. He loved and respected old Maxwell Beresford and his daughter,

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and he determined not to make them the subjects of wild, speculative, eerie gossip. If all ended there, as he prayed (though he scarcely ventured to hope it would be so at first, when the ghastly impression was fresh and subduing), why should any know of that weird prophetic curse that lay upon the house, and that in so many respects had been strangely accomplished?

"As to the awful manifestations which had been made to Eunice, none knew of them but himself; she had confided the events of that last terrible night to him alone, also the mystic revelation of the previous year when the violin had disappeared. The facts of its being marvellously restored, and as supernaturally again withdrawn at the moment of death, were known to Mrs. Hancock the faithful old housekeeper, who adored her mistress. The professional nurse, too, was aware of its final vanishing; but she was a prudent, sensible, practical-minded woman, who had no knowledge of, or faith in, esoteric powers outside the ordinary limitations of man's being. It was she, in fact, who had been the first to suggest 'trickery;' she felt neither awe nor fear, only indignation; and for the day or two that she remained, before returning to the London hospital, she made no mention to the three or four servants who were the sole other inmates of the great Manor House of what had occurred.

"And though Mrs. Hancock was inclined at first to believe that all sorts of witchcraft and black-

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magic had attended her dear Miss Eunice's death—for she had heard the mysterious music on two or three occasions, and she heard it again the night after her mistress died—yet by carefully concealing all else from her, and by urgently insisting on trickery, my father at last induced her to accept this solution of what had terrified her. She was familiar, of course, as were all in the neighbourhood, with the legend that declared the Manor House to be haunted by the spirit of a woman who had committed murder beneath its roof in the olden time; but that was all.

"For the same reason that actuated my father, she promised to breathe no word of the strange things that had happened. She had loved and honoured the family she had served so long and so well, and it would have broken her kind old heart to have heard any member of it spoken of in terms of reproach or slight.

"And now, at last, to reach the final mystery—final, at least, *as yet.*

"More than a year passed away, and by degrees the terribly strong impression made on my father during his sojourn in Daleshire paled and faded to a certain extent, as things must and will, under the numbing influence of relentless time, that potent destroyer of all illusions and impressions, whether they be for good or ill.

"About this time he had business in Westerham, whither I accompanied him, being then a lad of nearly fifteen. And then, when this business was

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concluded, he thought, being so near, that he would like to look once again on the old house that enshrined so strange a story.

"We drove out to Cotham, and walked on to the Manor, but found it empty and deserted. No one remained in it even as caretaker; it was void of all human presence. He into whose hands it had passed on Maxwell Beresford's death, when the mortgages were foreclosed, and who had granted Eunice a home there for the last two months of her life, had as yet made no use of the property of which he had become possessed.

"Gaunt and desolate it looked, with its innumerable windows blank and barred and rayless. All those on the lower storeys being protected by outside shutters, only those diamond-latticed casements away in the quaint old gables caught the light and reflected it a little. Dreary it seemed in the extreme, left, as it were, to decay and moulder with the race that had lived and loved and died within its walls, and were now extinct.

"Even my inconsequent boyish heart felt chilled and depressed, I scarce knew why. A feeling of eeriness, almost of awe, stole over me, as we stood in silence outside the massive gates, which were securely fastened, and gazed away to where that great grey pile raised its ponderous bulk, just within sight of the high-road.

"Where were those who had looked out on the world from all those melancholy, sorrowing windows through the misty past—looked out in joy and grief,

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despair and ecstasy; with the ardent hopes of restless, fervid youth; with the disillusioned eyes of disappointed middle life, that has eaten eagerly of that sunny southern apple that mocks the thirsty one, and found but dust and ashes at its core? Or, again, where were those who had looked abroad thence, with the calm, contemplative eyes of age that had played its part in the drama of life, outside which it now stood contentedly, knowing it was but the preface, the prelude to the real play which will soon begin for all? Where were they all? I asked myself in vague bewilderment, losing myself in a strange, confused, meditative dream, unfamiliar to my young careless mind. But somehow, looking at that grey old house, and knowing even dimly of the strange shadow that silently brooded over it, and that, with suddenly quickened imagination, I almost fancied I saw, I seemed to myself to grow, even there and then, older and more thoughtful.

"After a little we turned from the gates and pursued our way through the sweet country lanes, to that graveyard not far distant. As my father could not enter the house, he would at least pay a last visit to the Beresfords' final resting-place; 'And then, doubtless,' as he said to me, as we walked between those perfumed hedges, 'we shall hear no more of the Manor House, or the dead race that owned it.'

"My father had told me very little of what had occurred at the time of Eunice Beresford's death.

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The restoration and final disappearance of the violin I was obliged to know, being in the house at the time, and seeing the mysterious violin with my own eyes."

"Ah! you saw it, Dysart! What did it look like?" interpolates Cyril Raymond quickly.

"Just like an ordinary fiddle," answers the Professor, "save that it looked old, very old, even to my ignorant child's eyes. It had a strange look of age about it, inexplicable, but undoubted, as if antiquity had set its own peculiar seal upon it, as indeed it had. But my father had told me nothing of the prophetic writing which he had discovered—I was too young to be trusted with such a confidence—neither had he told me anything of what Eunice had imparted to him with regard to that awful night in which her father visited her, and restored the violin. But yet I knew quite enough—being familiar with the legend of the haunting spirit, as known to the Westerham world—to feel there was something strange, weird, uncanny, about the house.

"We soon reached that historic old church, beautiful in its old age, with its ivy-clad tower, and moss and lichen-grown walls that veiled so tenderly the decay that here was picturesque. It was a lovely old-fashioned graveyard, set on the slope of a hill facing the westering sun; not trim and pared and pruned with maddening, jarring precision. There was long lush grass waving above the lowlier sleeping places, unmarked by memorial

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stone; rich clover grass, in which sweet smelling wild-flowers bloomed luxuriantly and at will; and there were plenty of trees—lovely gnarled old oaks and beeches, as well as weeping ash and willow, and cypress and yew—through whose glorious foliage the sunlight fell in chequered radiance on those quiet graves.

"You may wonder why I seem to rhapsodize about that country graveyard, and how I remember it so well; but it made a strong and lasting impression on me, which, all things considered, perhaps, is not very surprising.

"Near the centre of this abode of the dead there was a sort of fosse or moat, only the bottom was dry and gravelled instead of containing water. You descended to this perfectly circular sunken path by a rather long flight of steps; or you crossed to the centre of green that the path enclosed, and on which were some of the handsomest tombstones in the graveyard, by a pretty rustic bridge. But it was to that lower level we were bound, for within this circle were some eight or ten vaults, the burial-places of the few families of distinction in the neighbourhood. That of the Beresfords was one of the most important. All the vaults had large iron gateways, through the bars of which one could look into the space beyond. That which we sought was the third from the steps. We came to a standstill before it; the gate had been repaired and was securely padlocked.

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"We stood and looked into the gloomy, silent chamber, with faces close to those strong, unyielding bars. I looked vaguely straight before me at the piles of mouldering, dust-laden coffins, without any definite purpose in my gaze, and with a sense of dull depression, mingled with a feeling of bewilderment and confusion in my breast strange and unfamiliar. I seemed stupidly to stare at nothing through a dreamy haze of undefined trouble, and a sudden, astonished, excited exclamation of my father's startled and unnerved me. . . . He had been looking, with twisted neck and straining eyes, round into the shadow of the right corner of the roomy vault, where rested the coffins of the lately dead.

"'My God! what is it? Are my eyes deceiving me? Am I mad or dreaming? . . . Great God! surely—yes, surely, it is open! . . . No, it can't be; it is something in my sight!' he murmured in rapid, almost frenzied utterance; while I, scared, though I knew not what he meant, fell back against the tangled mass of ivy on the outer wall of the vault, with beating heart and starting eyes.

"'Arnold, my son, come here; tell me what is this. Your eyes are young and strong, and will not play you false. Do you see something like a mass of tumbled white drapery away to the right there? . . . Do you see—do you think—that—that the last coffin left here is—is—is *open?*'

"The idea of an open coffin did not greatly appal me; or rather, perhaps, I should say, I was

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so enormously relieved to find that this was what had so startlingly affected my father, and not some fearful ghostly vision, some ghastly, spectral form, that I felt comparatively easy and courageous.

"I moved to the spot where he stood, and gazed as he directed; and after a moment or two, when my eyes again grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw that it was even as he said. . . . Old Maxwell Beresford's coffin lay in that right corner in a niche of its own; even there in the shadow the fresh deep red of the handsome velvet gleamed richly. On it stood Eunice's, covered in black; but across the lower portion of the coffin was thrown a heap of white linen that might be either sheet or shroud; and, on looking more intently, I saw that the coffin *was* open, as I could plainly discern the creamy tint of the satin lining.

"I told my father, and he seemed to me extraordinarily disturbed. Of course, I thought it was very strange and queer that the coffin should be open, especially if also the body were gone; and from where I stood, it appeared as if it were empty! But I had read and heard of such things being done before by wicked men, perhaps hoping to get a reward, or to steal something, or for some equally evil purpose. But why my father should be so terribly dismayed and aghast I, not having the clue, could not guess.

"'It has begun!' I heard him mutter. 'That awful curse is real, active, living. And she, that sweet, pure, patient soul is the victim. . . . Great

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heavens! what an inscrutable mystery it is! *Can* such a weird, ghastly horror be?'

"Wild and incoherent seemed to me his broken, murmured speech.

"We at once sought the guardian of the dead, the caretaker of that peaceful graveyard.

"The man was genuinely astonished, and even alarmed. He brought the keys, and in another moment we stood within that vaulted chamber, amidst the mouldering dust of the extinct race of Beresford, and gazed with awed, non-comprehending eyes at the singular and novel sight—a coffin open and empty among its fast-sealed brethren—a coffin that looked as if some one had lain down to sleep within its narrow space for a brief repose, and, awaking, had tossed the coverlets aside and gone forth from the silent companionship of the dead into the palpitating world of life around, having gained a new and strange experience.

"What was the meaning of it? Who had opened those jealously closed doors? Who had liberated the imprisoned inmate? We read of 'seeking for the living among the dead;' but here it was reversed, and we should be obliged to seek for the dead among the living!

"The dead have no volition of their own; where, then, was the senseless clay that had occupied that narrow bed?

"On examining the coffin it was quite apparent that the body must have been removed before

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even the very earliest stages of decomposition had set in, as it was sweet and pure as when fresh from the undertaker's hand. And, strangest marvel, the nails that had been driven home so surely to their mark, sealing the dead within so fast and safe for all time, were all in their places, none of them extracted!

"It was as if a mighty heave had thrust up the lid from the *inner* side, and thus the quiet inmate had gone free."

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CHAPTER VIII.

CONCLUSION OF THE PROFESSOR'S NARRATIVE.

"THE man who was the then sentinel appointed to watch over those dreamless sleepers was astounded, even more so than ourselves. He could not account in any way for the disappearance, for, in cases where graves have been rifled for the purpose of theft, both body and coffin remain; and where it is designed to steal the body, the coffin goes too.

"The gate that had been out of order at the time of Miss Beresford's funeral had not been repaired for a month or more, but during the interval it had been securely fastened with stout rope, which remained undisturbed, he knew, as once or twice a week he made the round of that sunken path, to keep it in order and see that all was right. Of course, he didn't take any particular notice of the interior of the vaults, having no reason to imagine it necessary; but anything wrong with the gates would have immediately attracted him.

"There had been no loiterers about the graveyard at that time, nor at any time. It was quite

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different from the large cemeteries that are open to all, at all times; the gates here were always locked, except at service time, or when he and his men were at work among the graves, and even then they often locked themselves in. Any one wishing to visit the graveyard would have to apply to him for the key.

"My father remained silent, sunk, doubtless, in speechless amaze, knowing what he knew about that awful mystic prophecy, while the man exclaimed and explained; but after a little he roused himself. It was necessary, he thought—such, at least, I consider must have been the feeling that actuated him—that he should talk, and talk naturally; expressing indignation, anger, astonishment, at the sacrilege that had been committed in the removal of the dead; carefully doing and saying all that might avert suspicion (superstition is a plant of natural and gourd-like growth in the ignorant peasant mind) of any unholy, occult, weird influence having part in this mystery of disappearance.

"Thus they spoke for a while. Why should the body be stolen? There were no valuables buried with Miss Beresford; neither would the theft and retaining of the body be likely to induce a reward, as there were none to offer one—no relative, no one caring for this last scion of an extinct race, argued the man, who was both shrewd and sensible.

"Yes, my father agreed that this was very rational; but, still, in robbery for some purpose

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was to be found the only solution of this extraordinary problem. Doubtless it was in the interests of pathology this hideous desecration had been carried out. There were circumstances attendant on Miss Beresford's last illness and death, peculiar phases both of brain and nerve-power, that may have been heard of, and elicited overweening, irrepressible curiosity in some sacrilegious, scientific mind, that hesitated not even at crime to gratify that baleful craving.

"Such was the only possible and feasible mode of accounting for the singular fact of disappearance. And with this argument, a little above his head, the man seemed convinced, and my father's task here was over.

"Boy as I was, I could see what a terrible effort he made to keep up, and not give way to the natural human awe and dread that must have been strong upon him. The strain was great, he was ashen pale, and his limbs shook as if he had the ague.

"But still he did his best to spare those last two members of the old Beresford family all obloquy and injurious, wild, desperate surmises. He interviewed the proper authorities, laying his statement of the facts before them. The world would have to know the strange and horrible fact of Eunice Beresford's body having disappeared from its coffin; better that it should know it first through him, stamped with the peculiar impression he desired to give it.

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"And now all was done that could be done by him. The authorities would take all proper steps to try to recover the body, communicating with him as success or the reverse attended their efforts, he, of course, bearing all expense. But I know now, as surely as if he had told me with his own faithful lips, that this was all done to give a false scent, as it were, to the world; to prevent the possibility of their imagining any mystery behind. Not, surely, that any could dream of what I am convinced he believed to be the reality of that awful disappearance.

"Was not this another startling step in the realization of that terrible wizard prophecy? 'She will die and be buried, but she shall come again, aye! in sooth, again,'" concluded Arnold Dysart dreamily.

. . . . . .

"It's marvellous and ghastly, Dysart; an out and out horrible story. A fellow feels completely bowled over, utterly floored, by such weird, terrible coincidences. But still, even with all that swelling pile of realized predictions, I feel morally convinced that they were but a chain of singular chance agreements with that devilish writing your father found," says the barrister earnestly. "And I am borne out somewhat in what you'll call my stubborn unbelief," he continues, in slow argumentative tones, "in its mystic, prophetic character, in my want of faith in the theory that the mesmeric power remains after the person who possessed it

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has passed into shadow-land; that the world is dominated and controlled, in some singular cases, by the living, active influence of the 'will-power' of certain strange, strong minds, largely possessing the magnetic current, that have passed away into the darkness, but whose spirit of Thought still is living potent and subduing somewhere. This is the theory you advocate, is it not—what Raymond believes, and what your story goes to prove? But I am borne out, as I say, in my incredulity by the fact that, notwithstanding the mass of evidence you have given us of the inexplicable concurrence of events—phenomenal events in some instances, like the mysterious music—yet that still, through all these years, the crowning point of the prophecy remains unfulfilled. I take it for granted, from your manner, that your story is at an end, and yet Eunice Beresford has *not come again.* Doubtless, the old Manor House has either been pulled down, thereby exorcising all indwelling evil spirits, or, still more likely, it has been restored and rejuvenated, and is now the abode of modern fashion that knows and cares nothing about the Beresfords, and who would laugh immoderately at the idea of anything so absurdly obsolete and old-fashioned as a ghostly presence sharing their home.

"Even when poor Miss Beresford died, comparatively late as is the date, superstition still lingered here and there; but since the diamond-wedding of our century with time, the world has

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grown infinitely more practical, as well as infinitely more scientific—the one being a natural outcome of the other—and those lingering marsh-lights of superstition have been extinguished once and for all by the penetrating electric rays, etc. There is no longer any corner sufficiently dark for the traditional ghost to lurk in; all is swept and garnished, and pitilessly exposed to the searching rays of realism or rationalism."

"But, Fenton," exclaims the clergyman, almost impatiently, "how can you be so obtuse? The very scientific progress that you advance as an argument against Dysart's story, annihilates yourself, and leaves you nowhere. The matter under consideration is altogether appertaining to the domain of science—*most modern science*—and not, as you seem to imagine, to vulgar superstition. Surely, the weird and mystical tale we have listened to is not to be ranked as a mere 'ghost-story.' A supernatural episode, if you will; but I question greatly whether what we now call by this obscure and comprehensive term may not be looked upon as quite natural by our descendants, thanks to science. The science of thought, or 'will-power,' seems to me almost an illimitable field for speculation and discovery, and one which has been very little worked as yet. That man's marvellous mental spirit dies not with the breath, I feel assured. Perhaps, as a clergyman, you may think that I ought not to hold such theories, or, at least, ought not to confess them; but I do not see

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that they are in any way subversive of the faith which I profess and teach; on the contrary, I consider that faith, as a beacon-light, lighting us to those glorious and divine mysteries of our own immortal being; and that to seek to unravel a few of the occult threads of our spiritual nature, is no more displeasing to the Most High, who, in His beneficent love and mercy, has given us the grand, crowning, priceless blessing of intellect—intellect so soaring in its nature; that, though bound by the finite laws of human life, strives to grasp the Infinite—than He is angered at our wresting secrets from Nature's storehouse.

"But have you quite finished, Arnold? Is your story at an end? Has the house of the Beresfords indeed undergone the transmutation Fenton suggests, and become the dwelling-place of wealth and fashion?"

"By a strange chance, Harvard is right in his conjecture," answers the Professor. "The Manor House *has* been restored, and is now the abode of wealth, though not exactly of rank and fashion. By rather what I call a coincidence, I know a little—a very little—indirectly, of its present occupiers, which seems to myself all the more singular, as I took no steps at any time to hear anything of the house. The impression made upon my boyhood by the mystery of the violin, followed by the disappearance of Miss Beresford's body from the family vault, naturally wore away, and became almost effaced with years. I had no clue, as I

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have already told you—knowing nothing of these" —pointing to the papers he had laid down on an adjacent table.

"My dear father died in less than a year from that day on which we made the discovery in old Cotham Church graveyard, his death accelerated, I verily believe, by the strain of mind and horror he had gone through, and by the weird secret he kept faithfully locked in his breast. Within a few months of his death, I know he received information from the Westerham authorities that all possible measures had been taken for the recovery of the missing remains of Miss Beresford, but without avail. He died before I was sixteen; I am now, as you fellows know, just forty, and until some nine or ten months ago, I never dreamed of the existence of these papers. I found them by chance, last autumn, in a private—I can scarcely call it secret—drawer of my father's writing-table, which I have retained for my own use. I thought they were quite valueless, and was about to burn them unread, when, on opening them carelessly for that purpose, the words 'Westerham' and 'the Manor House' caught my eye, and at once enchained it. With a rush came back all the strange, wild memories of my brief boyish associations with the Beresfords, and with eagerness I perused the memoranda my father had made of that singular episode of his life. Also the hidden prophetic writing which he had found, and which, read by the light of the occurrences he testified to,

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seems, I aver, in spite of Fenton's incredulity, to be the key to a terrible mystery!"

. . . . . .

"And what do you know of the present tenants of that uncanny Manor?" asks Fenton lazily. "Nothing, doubtless, eerie or uncommon; and I think I would venture to stake a small wager that these unknown people, whoever they may be, have experienced no unpleasant revelations of realized prophecies since their occupancy—eh, Dysart?"

"No, very possibly. All seems as prosaic and commonplace, according to what I have heard connected with the house and its inmates, as if they inhabited the latest atrocity in the way of the 'select villa residence' type that a modern builder can perpetrate.

"Some seven or eight years ago, the house having fallen into grievous decay—the man into whose hands it passed on Maxwell Beresford's death having either failed to find a tenant for it, or abstained from seeking one—it was purchased, with a large portion of the original estate, by a wealthy old cotton-spinner from Lancashire. He had the place put into thorough repair, I understand; transformed it into a stately mansion, modernized it as much as circumstances would allow; and there he lived, for some five years or so, in solitary grandeur. He was a widower, with a reprobate son; but, about three years ago, he married a lovely young creature—young enough to

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be his granddaughter, I believe. I know nothing either of husband or wife.

"The way in which I became acquainted with these facts is, that I became very intimate, some few years ago, with a soldier-cousin of this girl who afterwards married Cotton; and he confided to me that he was then almost engaged to a sweet and beautiful girl, his step-uncle's daughter. He had loved her all her life, he declared, with a ring of passionate tenderness in his tones; but he feared they could not marry for some time, as he had nothing but his captain's pay, although he had large expectations from a wealthy uncle.

"A year or two later, I received a letter from him from Bengal, whither he had gone with his regiment some months previously; and to that letter there was a postscript, saying that the dream of his life was over and his heart broken; that, henceforward, his profession held for him his sole interest in life—a few noble, manly lines, showing the true, brave, faithful heart of the man, in which he mentioned the marriage of the girl he so devotedly loved (though with never a word of blame to her) to a cotton manufacturer and a millionnaire, who lived a few miles out of Westerham—the girl's native city—in the old Manor House belonging to the dead and gone Beresford family.

"And though I had not then found those papers, yet even so the mention of the name excited a certain interest in my breast; and, in any later

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letters, I looked for any chance allusion that might tell me something of those unknown people who lived in the house to which tradition attached so tragic a story. But the details I have gathered are few and bald.

"The old man adores his young wife; their union is one of complete happiness, with not a shadow to mar it, save, perhaps, the reprobate son, who, however, has been long banished from his father's roof.

"The girl has apparently forgotten her lover, who is still in India; either that, or she prudently weighed 'love and money' in her heart-scales; love kicked the beam, and she married money, and is 'happy ever after.'

"I was truly sorry for Erncliffe; he is a thoroughly good fellow, I know, a man of stainless rectitude and spotless honour, and with a strong element of chivalry in his unselfish nature. His one strong desire in his letters to me, I plainly saw, was to remove any injurious impression I or others might conceive of the girl who could so heartlessly throw him over when wealth came along; indirectly, he made all valid excuses for her, speaking of her father's strong propensity for speculation—how he had plunged so deeply lately into that fatal sea, and had almost failed to come up again, was very nearly sucked under for good and all; and hinting very broadly that it was to save her father from his terribly pressing pecuniary embarrassments that his lovely young cousin had sacrificed

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herself. I don't know; it may be so, of course, though I think the record of our marriage-market of to-day shows pretty clearly that England's fair young daughters are quite ready and willing to so sacrifice themselves on the cold altar of ambition. They offer up their beauty and youth, and honour and virtue, on the dark, unlovely shrine of an old man's gold, or a bad man's title or lands, as the case may be, and count it no deed of wondrous heroism, no act of self-abnegation. And yet we wonder at the important place which the Divorce Court holds in our midst to-day. We train our girls to consider 'a good settlement in life' the one thing desirable, attained whether, I am almost tempted to say, honestly or dishonestly; for such legal couplings—the holy word 'marriage' seems out of place in such a connection—*are* dishonest; in my mind, all marriages unhallowed by strong, true, pure love are vile,—we train our young womanhood so to think, as I say, and yet we dare to feel surprise and resentment at the result of our own teaching.

"But, to return to the Manor House. In spite of the utter prosaicality of these very modern central figures in the picture; in spite of the regilding and general rejuvenescence of the old, old frame in which that picture is set, yet I cannot help expecting new developments. I cannot but think that the world will hear again, in some way, of that mystic house! Perhaps it is still in the distant future; and yet that strange writing said that

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when 'he, who in the far-off days was predestined to find that hidden scroll, should hear the mysterious music, the final mystery of that weird prophetic curse should have begun!'

"Those wild, strange words, seeming to foretell that Eunice Beresford would live again and work out that curse, I look upon as a mere figure, or perhaps, rather, a phantasy of a disordered brain; but what I do believe is that that tragedy of the past foreshadows some terrible tragedy in the future, that will, in some way, link itself by similitude with that distant horror, and will be induced, or brought about, by some strange occult influence *in* the house, that is really the evil living 'will-power' of the dead and gone Dorothea!"

And with these words, Professor Dysart's narrative, and the discussion that ensued, and which took place in his rooms at Cambridge, comes to an end.

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PART II.

THE VARLEY MURDER CASE.

"What nether-world gulf-whispers doth she hear,
In answering echoes from what planisphere,
Along the wind, along the estuary?"

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CHAPTER IX.

THE VERDICT.

THEY are the winter assizes, and the court-house in the large, populous city of Westerham is crammed to suffocation. It is a trial for murder, and that chamber of justice is literally packed from floor to ceiling with human heads; not one square inch of room but is utilised; and human eyes—sympathetic, awe-struck eyes, eager, curious eyes, and hungrily excited eyes—gaze from every corner of the spacious building on the central figure, on that small, slight girl with the white, set, lovely, but inscrutable face, who stands in the dock.

The trial has lasted three days, and all the time that soft, girlish face has worn the same fixed, stony look—not so much a scared or terrified expression as an intense eagerness, held in fierce suppression; as if there was a horror behind those large, innocent blue eyes, ready to leap into them, but kept back by sheer force of will. But only the physiognomist sees all this; to the crowd it is a death-like, pale, fragile, sweet girl-face, worn with suspense and dread.

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And now all these hundreds of eyes are momentarily averted from that isolated figure. The jury are slowly filing back into the court; the verdict—that mighty word of such terrible significance, on which depends the life or death of the human creature whose existence literally hangs upon the breath of those other few poor human creatures—is about to be pronounced, and a thrill of expectation runs through that densely packed throng; a murmurous wave seems to pass over it, like a summer breeze through foliage, leaving an intensity of stillness, a hushed, breathless silence behind. And the slender figure in the dock bends slightly forward, one small white hand grasping the rail in front, and the eagerness, at this supreme moment not to be repressed, looks from those great blue eyes, as they almost glare in frenzied doubt at these twelve arbiters of her fate.

She looks nowhere else, as she stands there, with a ray of wintry sunshine lighting up the deep gold of her hair. All these hundreds of human faces seem to have no meaning for her; only these twelve men, gifted with so fearful and unnatural a power, form her world. And yet, away in that corner to the left, separated somewhat from the crowd, sit two figures—a woman bowed with the weight of years, is it? or woe? A woman in whose agonized, worn, aged face there still lingers a something that instinctively makes one feel that she and the prisoner are connected by that closest

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of all ties, mother and child. The elderly man at her side is evidently her husband ; his impatience and nervous anxiety know no bounds ; his gaze is constantly turned on his daughter, as if to try to strengthen and support her through this terrible ordeal ; but, strange, extraordinary phenomenon, though the mother's face is filled with a great fear and anguish, as if a horrified pain had got into those haggard eyes, and would not be expelled, yet never once are those eyes turned on the pitiful white face, on the slender girlish figure of the prisoner at the bar.

And now there is the authoritative cry of "Silence in the court!" although the silence is already so profound, so deep, that one could almost fancy one heard all these throbbing hearts beat as one gigantic pulse. These terrible twelve whisper together for a moment, and then the foreman speaks, speaks loudly enough ; but the one listener whose fate depends upon his fiat does not seem to have heard, as she still stands, with head outstretched a little, and great eyes dilated, non-comprehending. But the crowd has heard, even to the furthermost corner of the building, and a sudden great and mighty shout fills that silent court-house, and escapes out through one or two open windows into the wintry air beyond, to the eager, curious, waiting throng outside. And another bursts forth, and is re-echoed by those outside the closed doors, and the air is rent on all sides by the cry, "Not Guilty!" Every

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little senseless urchin expends his small soul screaming those pregnant words; the fickle, sensation-seeking crowd, that would be just as much impressed and excited—nay, much more morbidly interested, if that last awful word had stood alone, without the merciful preceding negative; only then their enthusiasm in the cause of justice would have vented itself in awe-struck whispers, in gloomy ominous head-shakes,—shout themselves hoarse proclaiming the thrice blessed news. Caps are flung in the air by exuberant souls in the gallery, and fall on the heads of those below, who are vociferously called on to return the unconsciously acquired property.

And while still the doors are unopened, before the crowd yet begins to melt away, the meaning of the tumult dawns on the dazed brain of her who is the centre and cause of all this wild commotion; the full meaning of that triumphant cry resounding on all sides reaches her; and for a moment her eyes close, and the willowy, pliant young form sways a little, as if she were about to faint. But only for a moment; the next, those lovely blue eyes open, with the strained expression gone; the whole face softens, as if some rigid tension of the muscles were suddenly relaxed, and a faint, shadowy, ghost-like smile, imperceptible to all but the gaoler standing near, plays round her lips for an instant, as her eyes seek, with an arrow-like precision—not the faces of those heart-stricken parents, now being congratulated by sympathizing

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friends and acquaintances on the result of the trial, but the face of a bronzed bearded man, who stands leaning against a pillar in an obscure corner of the court, who has thus stood each day, and all day, through the long, weary hours, just where her eye could reach, without having to turn her head, trying to sustain and cheer her by glances of faith and encouragement. But all through this last most terrible day, not once had she glanced at him; the faces of judge and jury were all that her suspense-held eyes scanned; but now they go to him straight, swift, sure, and such a look springs into them as almost to glorify her face. It was fair enough before, beautiful exceedingly; but now it grows absolutely angelic, the incarnation of lovely confiding innocence!

How plaintively, how pathetically young she looks to be placed in so terrible a position.

"What is she but a child? God bless her sweet face!" murmurs many a rough man, as he takes a last look at her who has been the central figure in that tragic picture those three days. And yet, child as she looks, she has been a wife nearly four years, and is now a widow, just acquitted of her husband's murder!

And while the court slowly empties itself of its tired and talking throng, the father frantically embraces his child, and asks God to bless her, inveighing in incoherent excitement against the dogged wickedness and devilish suspicion of one or two cursed officials, who could impute such a

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crime to so young and innocent and trusting a creature; while the tall bronzed man holds both the little cold hands in a grip like steel, as he gazes down with irrepressible love on the white, wearied, but altogether beautiful face.

"I don't know how I lived through it, Leonard," she whispers, with sweet blue eyes raised fearlessly to his; "but," she adds in a lower whisper still, "your presence seemed to give me strength beyond my own."

And then other friends come crowding round, and the girl, the erstwhile prisoner at the bar for the blackest of all charges, is the heroine of the hour. Even the great and dignified judge, the representative of the law in its most mighty and terrible force, condescends, contrary to all precedent, to congratulate the fair young woman on her full and perfect acquittal from even the suspicion of so atrocious a crime. For the beautiful Mrs. Varley is a person of some distinction in the busy city of Westerham, and even so immaculate and unassailable a being as a Lord Chief Justice may unbend a little, without any great derogation from his lofty state, when loveliness and wealth go hand in hand. . . . And then, at an entreating, compelling glance from those blue eyes, the frail, trembling woman who has remained strangely silent in the background totters forward with uncertain steps, and takes her daughter in her arms; but she does not kiss her; the worn face, out of which the horror has not yet been banished,

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is turned away over the girl's shoulder, and her lips emit no sound.

Then as she releases herself from the arms that do not seek to detain her, she sinks fainting to the floor. For a moment a wild gleam of fright springs to the great blue eyes, but the next Mrs. Varley is kneeling by the unconscious woman, trying her best to revive and restore her.

"Poor dear mother!" she murmurs, in anxious solicitude. "This terrible day has tried her sorely. God grant she may not be seriously ill."

"And you, Muriel, my darling—if I may call you so once again?" whispers a man's voice in her ear.

"I, Leonard!" she answers, looking up at him with those childlike, innocent, trusting eyes. "Oh, I have——"

And though her lips say no more, those tell-tale eyes say as distinctly as tongue could utter that little word "you." And yet she is a new-made widow, with a murdered husband's blood crying out for vengeance.

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CHAPTER X.

TOLD BY A SPECIAL-PLEADER.

"Is the trial actually concluded, Fenton? I drove here straight from the station, and the man said he believed it was over, and that she was acquitted; but I thought, surely, he must be wrong," questions Professor Dysart eagerly, as he hurriedly enters a private sitting-room in the "Royal Hotel," Westerham, where Harvard Fenton, Q.C., the famous special-pleader,—whose brilliant annihilation of the prosecuting counsel in the "Varley Murder Case," and after eloquent, indignant protest in favour of the hideously slandered accused, is at this moment the one absorbing subject of conversation at every dinner-table in Westerham,—is himself dining in solitary state.

But he chose this loneliness, refusing the judge's invitation, and that of his brethren of the Bar, because he expected Dysart, who has now arrived.

"Ah, Arnold, my dear fellow; I'm sorry you're late," he says now, rising and shaking hands heartily with the Professor. "I hoped you'd turn up this morning, as you appeared to have so

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strong a fancy to hear how it went, and I guessed it would not run beyond to-day."

"But I can't understand," said the Professor, vexation and disappointment mingling in his usually even, earnest tones, "how a case so serious, so tragic, was huddled up so quickly, so indecently quickly. Why, I thought it would last for many days!"

"My dear Dysart," says Fenton, with a laugh at the other's supreme disgust at the brief length of the trial just concluded, "it is not often that the law is censured for its swift movements; the tortoise, not the hare, is its prototype, I fear, in most instances. But the Varley case—an extremely interesting one, by the way; an interest radiating, of course, from the wondrously fascinating central figure—was not huddled or hurried in the slightest degree. The truth is, there was *no* case properly so-called. The real culprit, as every sane man must believe, was arrested and judged by a higher court than ours, while the brand of Cain was but freshly stamped upon his brow; the parricide went straight from his crime to his death. The case for the prosecution was simply nowhere from the first; it was either a piece of gross official blundering, or else fiendish personal malice —the latter most likely, the emanation of some jealous, spiteful woman's baleful whisper."

"Then you really think the wife was not guilty?" exclaims the Professor; and there is a tinge of—what is it?—in his tones. It sounds

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like incredulity, mingled with a sense of incompleteness.

Professor Dysart fully expected to hear that the beautiful Mrs. Varley was guilty of the terrible crime imputed to her, although Fenton's brilliant defence may have given her back to the world with a tolerably clean name. It is the way of barristers; *they must* know the truth; but "guilty" or "not guilty," makes no difference to them; they equally insist upon, and seek to prove (possibly by hints or inuendos against a person they know to be guiltless) the innocence of their client. It requires a very elastic conscience, or rather, none at all, as Arnold Dysart sometimes thinks, to make a really good barrister. And he now seems to feel an unreasonable sense of flatness, almost dejection, that the Westerham tragedy has ended so tamely. Surely, with his kind, gentle heart, he must have a strong motive, for allowing so morbid, so horrible a sentiment to have existence in his breast even for a moment; surely, he ought to rejoice that the fair young woman has been fully acquitted from even the shadow of so foul a suspicion. Murder is an awful word; and when bracketed with youth, and loveliness, and feminine weakness, and, above all, with what appears like sweet, trusting, confiding innocence, it is thrice terrible! But Professor Dysart has a motive, or, at least, thinks he has, for the peculiar attitude of his mind.

"Am I guilty? Is the unborn child guilty?"

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exclaims Fenton, with almost a tinge of enthusiastic defence in his accents, strange in one supposedly hardened by constantly looking on tragic misery, despair, and crime, through the ossifying medium of a legal lens.

. . . . . .

"Well, Harvard, I think you'll admit," exclaims the Professor, after a slight pause, occupied by him in preparing to share his friend's repast, and unburdening himself of overcoat, travelling-cap, muffler, etc.—for the weather is severe, and Arnold Dysart is not strong, besides having just come from a warm climate—"you'll admit that my words of a year and a half ago have been strangely verified. Do you not remember my saying that I felt convinced that the world would hear again, at no very distant date, of that weird old Manor House? And how tragically it has heard! At least, I know no particulars, only the bare, bald fact, that the master of the house has been murdered, foully and treacherously murdered. But why do I talk about my poor words; what do they signify? But if that woman had been guilty, Fenton, how startling would be the realization of the words of that mystic prophecy, 'When the tragedy these walls have seen is reproduced in dual shape in those distant days, then——'"

"Ah, exactly—in *dual* shape," interrupts Fenton, with somewhat of a mocking laugh. "My dear Dysart, do not let your naturally fertile and a trifle eerie imagination run away with you to

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fancy that the very ordinary murder, known to the world as 'The Varley Poisoning Case,' in any way fulfils the conditions of that uncanny document your father found more than a quarter of a century ago. First of all, there is no *dual* crime!"

"Ah! not yet—not yet!" murmurs the Professor *sotto voce.*

"And, secondly, if I remember aright, in that old legend of the Beresford Manor House, it was the lover was murdered, and not the husband. And I suppose you hardly think that the *rôle* of lover and husband are merged in one—at least, in the present instance. The wife loved the old man fondly, I am sure—they all bore witness to that effect—but in a nice granddaughterly way; she scarcely could ever have regarded him in the light of a lover, I should think. Besides, the lover that was, is very robustly alive, and——"

"The *lover!* What do you mean? What do you know of the lover?" interrupts the Professor eagerly.

"Well, a good deal, considering the brief period of our acquaintance; and a thorough good fellow he seems, as you said. It was he, in fact, who retained me for the defence. Dr. Hilliard, the lady's father, wished for——"

"Erncliffe back from India! Are you sure, Fenton? Captain Erncliffe?"

"Major now," answers the barrister laconically. "Back this six months," he adds, after a moment

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or two's pause, in which his attention is occupied by his plate.

"And, good God, man," cries the Professor, so energetically and suddenly as to slightly startle the imperturbable barrister, and cause him to spill a little of the wine with which he is in the act of filling his glass, "does not that very fact, that I didn't dream of, shake to its very foundation the structure of innocence that you seem to think so unassailable? Erncliffe returned six months ago, and three months later the old husband is mysteriously poisoned. What could look worse, knowing how matters were a few years ago between these two? How can you for a moment say that she should not be suspected? Why the most trusting, unsuspicious creature on earth should think that——"

"My dear Arnold, pray don't excite yourself! You are prejudiced——"

"Prejudiced!" interrupts the other impatiently. "Why should I be prejudiced? I know nothing of the young woman—never saw her in my life."

"No, of course; I don't mean individually prejudiced—that could not be possible, I think. If you *did* know her, you would feel at once how unjust your suspicions are—a loving, innocent, trusting child, with a face like an angel's. Why, look at me, an unbeliever by profession! For what lawyer, who is at all a success, or, at least, has plenty of business, can keep much faith in human nature? It is the seamy side that is for ever turned to him,

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until his eyes actually ache, looking at the ugly knots and many coloured tangle. Yet I believe in Muriel Varley's innocence as I do in the heavens above me!"

"Because you're a man as well as a lawyer, and are caught, like others, by the witchery of a face and winning wiles of manner," mutters the Professor scoffingly.

"You are prejudiced," reiterates Fenton, "by reason of your inclination to regard this tragedy as in some way a sequel to the strange history of the past, or rather, a realization in part of that wild prophecy discovered by your father. It is somewhat of a coincidence, perhaps, that there should have been a murder in the house about the time you seem to think that singular curse ought to be working out its final malevolence—though why it should be necessary that five or six-and-twenty years should elapse between Miss Beresford's death and the climax of accomplished vengeance I am at a loss to determine. But, unfortunately, murders are such commonplace events nowadays, are multiplying so terribly and mysteriously, that I think no significance whatever can be attached to the murder of old Varley at the Manor House, especially when we consider that it was the act of that wild reprobate son that you know of, and who committed the desperate deed under the pressure of enormous need of money. You see, this clear daylight of reality dispels the halo of weirdlike romance in which

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you are inclined to envelop the case," he said, leaning back in his chair and contemplating the Professor's somewhat distracted countenance with a calm smile of superior wisdom.

"Tell me all about it, Fenton, like a good fellow," speaks the Professor, after a pause, in which he seems to have been weighing the barrister's words. "I may say I know nothing. Your few lines nearly two months ago, scrawled to me in Egypt, hardly told me more than that there had been a murder in the old Beresford Manor House, that the wife was supposed to have poisoned her husband, and that you were retained for the defence, and concluded by saying that the trial was to come off early in December. The one newspaper you sent me contained almost as barren an account as your own. It was strange that there should have been so meagre a report of the case before the coroner and magistrate—a case that the latter thought serious enough to send for trial; but, of course, that was the result of powerful interest. I made my arrangements accordingly. Of course, I don't mean to say that I should have come home purposely, but I intended returning about the beginning of the year. My investigations of old Buddhist rites and doctrines—the occult Buddhism studied by 'Initiates' in the first century, and from which some unbelievers are wicked and daring enough to say we draw our whole theory of Christianity—were almost completed for the present,—I hope to go again in a

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year or two,—and so I decided to come just a month sooner than I had determined, and be in time to hear the trial, in which I could not help feeling an enormous interest—very foolishly, of course, you think; and doubtless you are right. And now I arrive to find it over."

"I'd have dropped you a line to tell you the actual day appointed for its opening, but I didn't know where to write; your movements when abroad are generally so erratic," interpolates Fenton, as he lights a cigar and dreamily takes a few enjoying whiffs, lazily watching the while the faint puffs of curling blue smoke rising above his head.

"Won't you light up, old fellow?" he asks, after a minute or two's silent luxuriating in the divine soother.

Why is the use of nicotine virtually denied to women? Why must a woman be socially ostracised—at least, in England—considered unwomanly, fast, almost improper, if she is known to smoke even the mildest, most inoffensive of cigarettes? Men claim to have no special prerogative in any particular food or medicine. Why in the tobacco plant? And if, in extreme moderation, the use of it is admitted to be beneficial, in cases where the nerves require to be calmed and soothed, why is the sex in which the nervous, emotional, hysterical temper predominates to be excluded from this mystic healer? Women have brain-work—and arduous brain-work—to do as well as men, and yet the phrases so often used in regard to the

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latter—"He *must* smoke, you know, while he reads and writes;" or, "A cigar helps him to think so much better;" or, "The luxury of a smoke is absolutely necessary after those long hours of study," would sound somewhat novel and strange in conjunction with the former.

Selfishness is essentially man's attribute, and what he wishes to keep to himself he manages to do in a large and lordly way. So, without actually formulating a decalogue of "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not," for his weaker fellow-worker in this weary world, he skilfully arranges it so that when women at all encroach upon these self-established privileges, if they venture to dispute the unwritten law of a divine, masculine monopoly in certain directions, they find matters made rather rough for them. It is men's opinion women really fear and value, not each other's, and with numberless women that opinion is a sort of *ukase* that they dare not defy.

. . . . . .

"It's rather hard upon a special-pleader, Dysart, to expect him to turn *raconteur*. I haven't your gift that way, dear boy; and if I weren't very good-natured I'd send you to the newspapers. However, as you wish to have the story *vivâ voce*, I'll do my best for a while; and if I grow tired I'll turn you over to the *Westerham Comet*, which, *en parenthèse*, luxuriates more in lies than any other paper out."

"Thank you, Fenton; you're a thorough brick,

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old man! A few words from you, and I'll feel master of the situation; whereas I might wade through half a dozen of these unreliable papers, and their conflicting statements would possibly leave me more obscure than ever," says the Professor, glancing up with a kindly smile in his dark, deep-set eyes, as between nervous, slender fingers he rolls a cigarette—the only form in which he conjugates the verb "to smoke."

"Well, you see," begins the barrister narratively, "somewhere about five months ago, just in the dead heat of the summer, old Jacob Varley, the cotton manufacturer, who bought the Manor House that had belonged to the Beresfords, fell ill. It was a sort of low fever, induced, the physicians stated, by the unusually high temperature of the season, accompanied by the excessive drought. You may remember that we had no rain for fully seven or eight weeks; though, of course, this must seem little to you, who chose to ruralize in arid, rainless Aden a year or two ago for nearly a whole summer, seeking vestiges of a lost civilization. I'd let the lost civilizations find themselves if they wanted, and be content with endeavouring to add ever so little to the civilization of to-day, which has still here and there enough lingering traces of primitive barbarism to justify a small crusade.

"When the 'record-seeker' of the future digs and delves amongst our remains, and discovers, perchance, a *gallows*, or possibly some wonderfully preserved document from which he may gather—

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if that scientific man of the future could even imagine anything so horrible—that men, in these vaunted days of high-pressure civilization, were actually endowed by Government with a licence to kill; that legalized human butchery was not alone allowed, but encouraged, enforced, and rewarded by the State,—I fear he will think that we were still but in a very early stage of evolution, but slowly casting off the slough of primeval ferocity, when bloodshed was the one grand ambition of undeveloped man; and that the other evidences he may find of our co-existent Christianity—the records of war or legalized murder side by side with apparent proofs that the religion of 'love' and peace, and good will and charity to all men had taken deep root among us; that we believed in and worshipped the Christ of Nazareth, and yet spent our highest ingenuity, for which we received honour, distinction, reward, in fashioning devilish instruments, or discovering chemical combinations, that would be most deadly in their slaughter of our fellow-men, our brethren in that Christ whose one supernally lovely and divine spirit of teaching was 'to love one another;'—that future record-seeker of extinct civilizations will, I say, be so puzzled by this hideous, gigantic contradiction, that he will——"

"Harvard, my dear fellow, as you are great, be merciful; in your very laudable desire to annihilate my pet pursuit, don't quite crush *me* beneath the weight of your eloquence. Besides, it would be

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a sad pity not to reserve the brilliant peroration that I am sure is brewing in your argumentative brain for some time when you are prosecuting counsel, and the defendant belongs to the hapless ranks of the 'killing no murder' species. Fire your heavy grape-shot, Fenton, at a responsible target, not at me. I am neither a soldier nor a clergyman, and, consequently, perhaps fail to be sufficiently impressed by the force of your reasoning; though I frankly admit that you seem to me altogether and utterly right in your views of 'war *versus* Christianity.' But, seriously, if I let you tackle this theme—one of your favourites, I know—you'll wander so far from the 'Varley Poisoning Case,' that you'll never find your way back again. He fell ill from the heat and the dry weather—there's your cue. Go ahead, old man, and don't stop to moralize."

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CHAPTER XI.

FROM THE "EVENING STAR."

FENTON laughs softly at the Professor's energetic interception of further digression, and meekly takes up the broken thread of narrative.

"It was a sort of intermittent fever; and the old man was better and worse, and all things were very uncertain. He was old, and some people said he could not recover. And through all this time of anxiety and suffering the young wife's devotion was lovely and untiring. She wore herself to a shadow in her constant attendance night and day upon the invalid; she could not bear that a strange hand should minister to her husband, and after a while he would take food or medicine from none other; she grieved terribly at the thought of losing him, it appears, her beautiful eyes often being red and swollen with weeping.

"Of course, the great mass of evidence in her favour was given by the servants at Varley Hall (so the old Manor House has been rechristened); in fact, with the exception of a few agitated words, respectively from Dr. Hilliard, her father, and

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Major Erncliffe, they were the only witnesses for the defence; and they one and all testified to her wonderful, loving devotion. Her own maid, Watson, gave a great deal of very important evidence with regard to the day of the murder and Richard Varley's hurried visit."

"The *day* of the murder! What do you mean by that?" questions the Professor quickly. "Was not the unfortunate man being slowly murdered all along by some of those insidious, stealthy, slow poisons?"

"Not at all. How did you get hold of that idea? No wonder you were prejudiced against the wife. Old Varley died of a tremendous dose of prussic acid, enough to kill a dozen men! The poison had been introduced into the sleeping-draught that was taken on the night of the day of the son's visit; but I have not reached that culminating point yet. Suddenly, after about two months of this fluctuating state, and when it seemed as if the old man must die, he took a marvellous change for the better; he grew stronger rapidly, and the physicians declared him good for another ten years at least.

"The young wife was half crazed with delight, she was so fond of him. All the servants testified to her laughing and crying together in hysterical joy at the thought of her 'dear old man,' as she called him, being spared to her a while longer. She went through the house singing, with radiant face, 'as happy as a queen,' as they phrased it, unable to

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keep from speaking to every one of her great happiness in the beloved master's recovery.

"Then there was some slight imprudence committed. Old Varley went out driving too soon, over-fatigued himself, or something of the kind, got a trifling cold, was threatened by a slight relapse, but nothing at all of any consequence. He had to take to his bed again, but only, as it was expected, for three or four days.

"Then Richard Varley came down, and forced himself into the old man's presence, to try and wring money out of him by fair means or foul. He was an out and out rascal, as I suppose you know, and had been forbidden his father's house years ago; he had disgraced that good, honourable father's name more than once—gambler, cheat, blackleg, liar! Jacob Varley had been compelled to cast him off, and disown him as his son.

"When old Jacob married the beautiful Miss Hilliard four years ago, he executed a will, leaving his widow £15,000 a year and Varley Hall; a sum of £5000 to his son Richard Varley; and all the rest of his great wealth in charity. But a year ago, when he heard by chance what a superlatively tremendous ruffian Richard had grown of late, he made a new will, in all other respects the same as the former, save that the son's name was expunged therefrom.

"But Richard did not know this; he thought the first will still stood; and he came to Varley Hall that September day, I verily believe, with

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the avowed intention of endeavouring to wring some money out of his father, weakened and less resistant as he might prove from illness; but really with the fell determination to *do* for the old man, and secure at least the five thousand that he imagined still would be his on Jacob Varley's death. He was leaving England for good, he said; and I am convinced he came prepared to commit that desperate deed if opportunity favoured him.

"He forced himself into the good old man's presence, into his very bedroom, violently ejecting the young wife, who cried and clung to her husband, longing to remain and sustain him through the terrible ordeal; but she was banished, and then a stormy scene took place; old Varley, prostrated by recent illness, and still ailing, was yet firm and unyielding. He was torn by distress and agonizing memories, for he had loved this evil man with passionate,woman-like devotion in the early years of his innocent, promising youth—loved him even long after he had forfeited all right to that love; and though that faithful love had now turned to disgust, contempt, almost loathing, still to be obliged to repudiate that son gave him unutterable pain, for the old man was of a peculiarly generous, noble, honourable nature himself, I understand, and especially despised the vices so rampantly accentuated in his son. He was spent and exhausted when that interview was over; but yet he had not yielded to the imperious demands, the threats, the cursings,

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the wild, sinful, impotent ravings of the baulked, unrepentant prodigal. He told his son quietly, though his heart bled inwardly, that he had done with him for ever; that he was less to him than the stranger passing at his gates; that if he was actually in want he could have a hundred-pound note, which he tendered him. He would relieve his necessity, as he would respond to any other call upon his charity; but not another penny of his money should he ever touch.

"The son stamped and swore and raged, and tore the note into a thousand pieces, but the old man remained firm. Unhappily, he did not mention the change in his will; if he had chanced to do so the fatal culmination might never have been reached. If Richard Varley had been quite assured that he would in no way benefit by his father's death, he might not have utterly blackened his sin-stained soul with that last crowning guilt. But five thousand pounds is a large sum to a desperate man, who is conscienceless and pitiless, and he will risk much to gain it.

"He dashed from the room, his lips foul with curses, having managed, as I believe, to leave that fell agent of death behind him. The large, handsome dressing-room opened off the spacious bedchamber; velvet curtains hung between, but were swept aside; and in his wild trampings to and fro, as he stormed and railed and swore at the poor old man, lying weak, trembling, defenceless, but unflinching on his bed, he may have caught up

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that night-draught from the little table at the side of the bed, unnoticed by the old man, who was too stricken by mental anguish at the unnatural scene to take much note of the details of the other's actions; and then, carrying the phial with him into the inner room out of sight, how easy, through one of the open windows (which would carry off the strange, strong odour), to empty out a portion of that innocent sedative, and substitute that deadly drug, afterwards replacing it as before. It was but a little bottle, that could be easily concealed in a man's hand, and none could guess of the change it had undergone.

"Shortly after he left the room he quitted the house. The vessel that he said he had taken a passage in for Melbourne was to sail from Liverpool at three o'clock in the morning. It was more than five when he left the Manor House—he was just barely in time.

"Less than a week later that vessel, *The Orinoco*, was reported to be lost with all on board, crew and passengers, not one saved! Richard Varley's name was entered in the sailing-books of the firm as having taken a passage in the ill-fated steamer; his name was also reported as amongst the lost. She foundered when only two days out; and what I firmly believe is, that Richard Varley intended landing at some distant port they would touch on their outward bound way, and coming back quietly to reap the reward of his guilt.

"But to hark back a little. Some two hours

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after he left Varley Hall it was discovered that the old man's desk had been forced open, and a roll of bank-notes and gold, amounting to nearly £1300, extracted therefrom. Old Varley was half-frantic, not with rage, but with humiliating grief and despair at having to call such a reprobate 'son.' But the young wife soothed and comforted, and poured the balm of her love and tenderness into those quivering, open wounds; and at last he grew calm, and it was hoped that he would not be thrown back seriously or very much the worse for the trial he had gone through.

"Watson, a thoroughly reliable woman, gave, as I said before, very important evidence connected with that day's and evening's proceedings. She was the last person, save the wife, to see the old man alive. She testified to being in her master's bedroom at half-past eleven o'clock. The household usually retired before eleven, but, owing to the confusion consequent on Richard Varley's visit, and the discovery made after his departure, they were later, she said. But you may as well read the woman's own words. Hand me that *Evening Star*, on the table at your back. Thanks. Yes—here it is—'Jane Watson in the witness-box.' Well, I've told you all the earlier part; you don't want that again. This paper gives a very accurate, exhaustive report. Where's the bit I want? H'm—h'm! Ah, yes—this is it;" and Harvard Fenton hands the Professor the paper, his finger indicating the following paragraph in the maid's evidence in the

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special edition of the *Evening Star*, under the somewhat melodramatic heading—

"STARTLING EVIDENCE ABOUT THE MYSTERIOUS VARLEY HALL POISONING CASE.

"*Jane Watson in the Witness-box.*

"Watson then deposed that she was in her master's room at half-past eleven o'clock, when he seemed to have grown quite calm and tranquil again.

"'The dear young mistress was sitting upon the bed beside him, reading to him, an' her hand clasped in his. They seemed as happy together as doves. They were like a picture,' continued the witness, with warm enthusiasm. 'He looked so lovin' at her, with his long white beard, as if she was all the world to him, an' he never could tire gazin' at her; an' she had a colour in her cheeks all that evenin', an' a light in her eyes that wasn't her way of late, an' made her look like a hangel. An' then, while I was still in the room, she stopped the readin' an' said—

"'"It was terrible stupid of me, Jacob dear, not to get your cough-mixture renewed to-day. Both papa and Dr. Freeman said this mornin' you should continue it, but we've had such an upset that I forgot all about it. I trust the tiresome cough won't bother you much to-night. You've got nothin' but your composin' draught to take, an' I suppose you won't take it till the very last."

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"'"No, indeed, my pet," he answered; "an' I doubt I'll take it at all. I'm growin' better, thank God, and gettin' independent of that horrible physic."

"'"Oh, but Jacob," she cried, quite distressed-like, "your sleepin'-draught—surely you'll take that, dear; you may have no rest if you don't, after this terrible day especial."

"'"I'll promise you, love, to take it if I can't sleep; but I'd rather let nature have a try first."

"'"Very well, dear old man," she said as soft an' sweet as a lamb; "an' I'll get up an' give it to you, Jacob, if you just touch the bell." Mr. Varley would have no nurse sit up with him now that he was better.

"'"Indeed, an' I'll do nothin' of the kind, my pet. You've had broken rest enough this good while back. If I want the stuff I'll take it myself. I am sure you ought to be for hatin' your old man, Murrie darlin', wearin' out his little girl's bright eyes."

"'Them was the blessed old gentleman's very words, an' I'll never forget them. An' for all answer the dear young mistress just hugged an' kissed the master as fond as fond—God bless her sweet, kind heart! An' then she went on with the readin'—which it was the Bible—an' I left the room, an' shortly after every one in the house was in bed. Mrs. Varley slept in the dressin'-room, just off the master's room.

"'An' then, somewhere about three o'clock in

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the mornin', we was all woke up by a terrible noise —a noise to haunt one to their dyin' day! There was first a hawful chokin' cry, an' then as if some hanimal clutched the bell, for it was like no mortal hand, the sound it made, so unnatural; an' the table with all the bottles an' glasses an' things that stood by the bedside was overturned with a great crash, as if some one was strugglin' fearful. An' then there were the most hawful screams from that poor young lamb that 'twas enough to kill her dead. She'd been woke up by the cry an' the bell, an' rushed into old Mr. Varley's room just in time to see him dyin' so fearful.

"'An' her mother was there at the same moment, an' fainted right off; an' Edwards, his own man, who loved him true, flew down like lightnin'; an' I on his heels, though I were nearly dead with the fright of it. An' there was the mistress in her night-dress, a screamin' for the bare life, with her face as ghashly as a corpse; an' Mrs. Hilliard lyin' like one dead on the floor; an' the dear sainted old gentleman, half in the bed an' half out of it, with his poor face lookin' so wild an' dreadful like, an' a horrible white froth on his lips, an' the bell in one hand, an' the glass he'd drunk the physic from in the other. An' the first thing that struck Edwards an' me with such a deadly, hawful chill of fear, though we didn't know the meanin' of it then, was the sickenin', overpowerin' smell of bitter almonds!

"'Then the mistress fainted dead away too;

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an' when the doctors came, they said he was quite gone, an' as how it was prussic-acid, an' that it must have been mixed with his medecine. But though they searched the house, not a sign of prussic-acid could they find. They—the imperent police, or detectives, or whatever they calls themselves—turned out every box, an' drawer, an' press, an' cupboard; all the lovely cabinets an' things that stands about in all the great drawin'-rooms, an' that have shelves or drawers or hidin'-places in them, they turned them all out. They hunted every room in the house that the family occupy, an' even some that they don't use, an' that is always shut up, like the "red parlour," an' the "blue drawin'-room;" but it was no good, nothin' could they find, which shows that Richard Varley must have brought it with him.

"'Yes, Mrs. Hilliard took on hawful. She'd been stayin' with her daughter for a few days, an' she was there that last terrible night; an' whether it was the shock of old Mr. Varley's death, dyin' like that, an' she bein' the first to get there, or what, but she's never been the same lady since—strange in herself, an' silent-like, an' wouldn't go next or nigh the house in all poor Mrs. Varley's trouble, do what they would. I think her mind's a bit gone; they say there's madness in her family.'

"This concluded Watson's evidence."

. . . . . .

"We had another most delightfully entertaining and irrepressible witness for the defence," continues

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the barrister, in a tone of retrospective enjoyment, when the Professor has finished reading with much interest Watson's evidence, during which time he (Fenton) has had a thoroughly restful, undisturbed smoke, lying back luxuriously in an American rocking-chair by a noble fire, and with a bottle of Louis Roederer at his elbow. "If she had been committed for contempt of court every time she was so threatened—and, indeed, I am afraid, deserved it—the time of incarceration might have been briefly stated in the phrase, 'for the term of her natural life.' She *was* droll, and she *did* take it out of the opposing counsel"—with a little amused laugh. "She was an elderly woman of the name of 'Page,' who had been Miss Hilliard's nurse, and who accompanied her to her new home as a sort of under-housekeeper.

"She had a doglike devotion to her young mistress, and could not contain her wrath against all officers of the law, from the police constable to the judge himself; she rated them all round with noble impartiality, and during the time she occupied the witness-box, she had the court indecorously convulsed with laughter, considering it was a murder case.

"They only reported one or two of her quaint speeches. She was too utterly impracticable; she would not answer questions, except when she chose and gave any amount of trouble; but they had wonderful patience with her, because she was rather an important witness.

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"Let me see—it's not in that"—as the Professor involuntarily turns to the sheet before him. "I think it was in this morning's *Daily Mercury;*" and Fenton stretches out a lazy hand, and takes a paper from a table near, which he opens, and proceeds to read aloud the following paragraph:—

"*Mrs. Page in the Witness-box.*

"This witness was then sworn, and gave her name as Martha Page, and occupation as under-housekeeper at Varley Hall; but she then became irritatingly recalcitrant, ignoring the questions that were put to her, and insisting on making irrelevant and abusive remarks.

"'I never did hold,' she proceeded to impart to the court, in a voluble and belligerent manner, 'with circustantal hevidence; it's downright heathenish in a Christian country to be made to hold your tongue when you is the only one as has somethin' to say. An' if it's convictions you want'—looking very fiercely at his lordship—'you'd have twice as many, only they wouldn't be the wrong people, if you let the prisoner speak; for if a body's not tellin' the truth they'll contradict themselves shameful at every hand's turn, for no one has a memory good enough to remember their own lies!'"

"By Jove! there's something in that," ejaculates the Professor, with a smile.

"The witness was several times called to order, but she declined to be admonished; and after

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answering a few questions in a very aggressive and unsatisfactory manner, she burst forth again, with emphatic energy—

"'It would be the greatest mercy if you all got took yourselves, juries, an' justices, an' the lot of you, an' were shut up in a pen there for all the gapin', idle crowd to stare an' gibe at, an' then to be told the dreadfullest lies on, an' never be let say one word; you wouldn't find it quite so pleasant then, I'm thinkin', for your lives to depend on the fancy of stupid, murderin' jurymen. Just think of Page there on a jury'—pointing to her luckless husband, who was coachman at the Hall, and stood in a group of the other servants. 'An' why not he as well as another? Why, I wouldn't hang a cat, no, nor a canary-bird, on his opinion, much less a human creature! Rubbishy, ignorant lot,' she continued, in spite of a running fire of reprimand, being told to 'stand down,' and threatened with committal for contempt of court, besides stern, fierce cries of 'Order in the court!'—'who'd just think as little of sentencin' a man to death if they were in a bad humour, or wantin' to get home to their dinners, or were tired of the whole business, as I'd think of killin' the slugs in a cabbage!'

"The witness, as already stated, was repeatedly threatened with committal for contempt; but she calmly disregarded all such suggestions, fillipping her fingers in a derisive fashion at his lordship, who could not repress a smile at the woman's

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absurd pugnacity. At last, finding it quite hopeless to try to extract any information from her, save what she chose to impart—and this being chiefly her own sentiments with regard to the law and its officers—she was desired, though with reluctance, as she was an important witness, to 'stand down;' but she did not seem at all inclined to obey, and at last had to be almost forcibly ejected from the witness-box, amidst roars of laughter, and authoritative cries of 'Order!' Her last muttered words, as she was being vanquished, were audible to many, and were a final shaft cast at the police, against whom she appeared to entertain an unquenchable animosity—

"'Mean, underhand, pryin' creatures, a reckonin' the very bits a body puts into their mouth! Just because they couldn't clap their dirty paws on the right man, death havin' caught hold of him first, and dragged him off to the devil, they must needs harrest a lady like my own dear, beautiful, blessed Miss Muriel, as wouldn't hurt a fly, the sweet, innocent lamb! I hates the very sight of them, I does!'"

. . . . . .

"Ah! they didn't report half of her racy speeches," concludes Fenton, as he throws down the paper with a laugh, in which the Professor joins. "Well, at any rate, Dysart, I think you'll have to knock under, and confess that your antagonistic attitude towards Mrs. Varley was utterly unjustified. She seems to me altogether

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in the light of a martyr and a very lovely one," he adds in a reflective tone.

"Yes, poor lady, she appears, indeed, deserving of all our best sympathy, though nothing could compensate her for the terrible ordeal she has undergone. To be suspected even for a day of such monstrosity, would be enough to crush for ever a sensitive nature. And yet I cannot help thinking how singular would have been the coincidence if she *had* been guilty; and how strangely it would have seemed like the beginning of the end of the 'weird of the Beresfords,'" murmurs the Professor in low, dreamy tones.

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CHAPTER XII.

THE EASTERN GABLE.

"Dreams full oft are found, of real events
The forms and shadows."

It was just three weeks before the sacred, genial Christmastide that the trial was brought to an end—a trial which had electrified all Westerham, causing it to preen its dull and somewhat dingy feathers with a lively satisfaction at having gained an enviable notoriety, and being lifted, even for the proverbial "nine days," from the virtuous, but colourless ranks of the commonplace.

. . . . . .

The festival, though a very grey and sombre one in the Varley and Hilliard households, yet is not quite without its deep-toned consolation, that often finds vent in Dr. Hilliard's impulsive speech to Major Erncliffe, his step-nephew, who is much with him during this shadowed winter-time.

"Think, Leonard," he will cry, "what it would have been to have had our child, our Muriel, lying under sentence of death in Westerham gaol

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this holy Christmas season! And yet it might have been so. Many, as pure, as innocent, as guileless as she, have died on the scaffold—have had their lives sworn away by wretches who, to gratify some petty malice, some unsuspected devilish spite or jealousy, have called God to witness to their hell-spawned lies. Or, again, the thrice cursed system of circumstantial evidence, corroborative testimony, call it what you will, has been too many for them; appearances have been against them, and have carried the day, and the innocent man dies, calling God and man to witness that he is murdered; and by-and-by the real culprit turns up—and yet the law has learned no lesson."

Thus he often speaks, till the bronzed cheek of the soldier grows pale, and Mrs. Hilliard's grey face grows still greyer. All through this winter season she moves about her house as a woman in a dream. The shock has told upon her sadly; it seems as if she could not shake off the effects of it, though her health does not actually give way. She never goes out, never even once crossing her daughter's threshold, making the inclemency of the weather and her want of strength an excuse.

But she is strangely changed; a singular dumbness, coupled with what strikes you as an unsleeping watchfulness, has fallen upon her; her eyes, too, have caught an odd, nervous, apprehensive way of glancing, that makes one feel uncomfortable. A silent, dreary, brooding woman

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she has become in these latter days, and one is almost tempted to place some credence in the report of a strain of insanity in her blood.

Mrs. Varley spends the Christmas season in the profound solitude of her widowed home. But soon after another "New Year" has wrapped the poor old sin-stained, shivering earth in its hopeful young embrace, she goes away for a few weeks—a change that all declare she so sadly needs, and comes back early in March.

. . . . . .

Old Jacob Varley has been dead now more than five months, and his charming young widow must really not be allowed to immure herself so completely any longer. She has shown a wonderful respect and affection for his memory, considering the terrible position in which she was placed with regard to his mysterious death—a death now universally laid at the door of Richard Varley, that wild, bad man, who had gone to his long account with a father's blood red upon his sin-stained hands!

. . . . . .

So Westerham society elects to accept Mrs. Varley as a "martyr," and designs to honour her as such. Old Jacob was a little, just a little, below the rank standard that these Westerhamites have raised up for themselves; though, of course, money is an ample cloak that covers all sins of parvenu birth, etc. Still—well, Muriel Varley belongs to the mystic middleocracy, that tries to steer a

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difficult, and ofttimes unrecognized course between plutocracy, that it affects to despise as mere trade wealth, on the one hand, and aristocracy, that confounds its pretensions with those of its inferior neighbour, on the other; in short, Muriel hails from the professional classes, besides claiming on her father's side a very remote and distant kinship with the old and distinguished Beresford family, now extinct. And now that the offensive ingredient is removed—poor Jacob Varley, to whom a faint and subtle aroma of "cotton" still clung even in his retirement, and whose constant mislaying of the eighth alphabetical letter was an unceasing reminder of his lowly origin—now that she is a heroine and a martyr; above all, a martyr owning delightful Varley Hall, and fifteen thousand a year,—she is to be petted and made much of. If she had been equally a martyr, and shabby and shillingless, and yet audacious enough to be beautiful, Westerham society—the female portion of it, at least—would most probably have united in declaring that if she did not commit the crime imputed to her, she was, they felt convinced, quite capable of it.

As the first step in the "petting" process, the shining lights of Westerham society call upon Muriel. A young and beautiful and wealthy widow must not be allowed to shut herself up in solitude; it would be really quite un-Christian-like to neglect her at such a time, especially when there are sundry sons and brothers in a chronic

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state of impecuniosity, whose interests must be studied, as well as the more advanced Christian principles of neighbourly love.

They all unite in avowing that Mrs. Varley is "as perfectly lovely as ever—more beautiful, in fact, than in the sunny, untroubled days of her girlhood; but that there is a strange, sad expression in her glorious eyes, a sort of look of haunting sorrow, mingled with a latent horror, that will remain until the coffin-lid covers them up for ever."

. . . . . .

But these people bore Muriel. She does not want to be patronized by the Westerham *élite;* she is proof against the manifold seductive influences of Westerham's *jeunesse dorée;* and her doors are often heartlessly closed against those heroes who would fain pluck the "golden apples" growing—oh, so tantalizingly!—in her garden.

But she has one constant visitor during those early spring days who is never denied admittance—Leonard Erncliffe, who, in the right of a sort of cousinship, as well as of old friendship, presents himself at her gates, without fear of misconstruction in these watchful Westerham eyes. And even if they do read between the lines, what then? They will soon be presented with the no longer concealed book, writ so clear, that those who run may read; for it is tacitly understood between those two, though perhaps it has never been said in so many words, that when Muriel's year of mourning shall have expired, she and Leonard will become man

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and wife. Poor fond, faithful, adoring Jacob Varley stretches from his grave a ghostly detaining hand that parts them just for this little space, and no longer; but after that the shadowy hand may stretch in vain; it, and he to whom it belonged, and the love that lies buried with him, will be alike forgotten by his widow—are forgotten, one would almost say, save for that wistful sorrow in the lovely eyes, for Muriel "lives, and moves, and has her being" in Leonard Erncliffe's presence.

He, passionately as he loves her, sometimes feels a strange thrill, a sort of dazed, shocked sensation, at the intensity of her feeling for himself, as if he were unconsciously dishonouring the old man's memory by allowing her to love him so devotedly, so entirely. He is a strictly honourable man; Professor Dysart judged him rightly. But, then, he is only a man, and madly, ardently in love with this beautiful young creature. So these quixotic glimpses of self-abnegation do not last long; and then, after all, he argues to himself, she did love her husband—she loved him truly and fondly. Had not he, Leonard, proof of it, in her untiring devotion to him during his illness?

"She is too noble and sweet a creature not to love devotedly any one who was so unsparingly good to her, as was old Varley," he murmurs; "but she loved him as she would a father, and all the ecstatic lover love is mine."

. . . . . .

And so the early spring weather passes away,

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and Easter is upon us unusually late this year—the last week in April.

Mrs. Varley has become marvellously charitable during those few months of her widowhood; she seems determined to be a "wise steward" of her husband's great wealth; in fact, to treat it as if held in trust for the benefit of others. At Christmas, though she was not visible, immense donations of charity in every shape were bestowed upon the poor of Westerham, and in the neighbourhood of her home; and now the Easter festival is to be alike celebrated; and blessings are called down upon her head in many homes of poverty. Muriel does not limit her almsgiving to the conventional "coal and blanket" business, perhaps accompanied by a small, very small, dole of money, and flanked by dubious aquatic soup. No; she does things on a princely scale. Money she gives freely, lavishly; and that spacious Varley Hall kitchen cooks quantities of rich, good, nourishing food, that, steaming from the spit or oven, are sent round to these poor homes. She seems to take an actual delight in giving to those miserable, half-famished wretches food such as they could never have hoped to taste again, even if they ever had done so in the past; to surprise them with these unexpected dainties, and see their looks of unalloyed, wondering amazement and joy, and hear their halting, abashed, but sincerest words of astonished gratitude.

On this Easter Saturday she is especially busy,

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taking an active part herself in the "distributions;" and when Leonard calls, he is told that she is in the housekeeper's-room, surrounded by a detachment of pensioners, and that he can either join her there or wait for her in her own peculiar sitting-room. He elects to wait; he feels hardly courageous enough—gallant Major though he is—to face all these uneducated eyes, that seem to make up in acuteness of gaze what they lack in brain-power.

"What an angel she is, my little Lady Bountiful, my beautiful, tender-hearted Muriel!" he soliloquizes, as he restlessly roams up and down, man-like, with his hands in his pockets.

A perfectly lovely room is this boudoir or private sitting-room of Muriel's; everything that love could imagine, or money could procure, and that could contribute to his lovely young bride's delight and comfort, was placed in it by old Mr. Varley. But Leonard Ernecliffe is now very familiar with it, and he walks up and down at first without noticing anything; then he takes up books, and throws them down again impatiently; stares at choice water-colours and rare porcelain that adorn the walls, and at statuettes and bronzes with lack-lustre eyes. Then, by-and-by, he makes the round of the room methodically, conscientiously, seemingly intent upon an exhaustive examination of each pretty trifle; but though he gazes most pertinaciously at all those fanciful ornamentations, his thoughts are far away, and instead of being the

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"*dilettante*" he seems, absorbed in the contemplation of a peculiar patterned blue-china bowl, or gravely weighing the merits of *cloisonné* enamel, priceless oriental jars, *repoussé* silver, hand-painted brackets, etc., he is straining his ears to catch the sound of a certain light footstep in the corridor without, and would ruthlessly consign bowls and brackets, fans and photographs, to everlasting oblivion, rather than miss the first glimpse of that sweet young face that will come smiling in to him —now—any moment—by-and-by, smiling under that badge of woe, that widow's cap, that seems such an anachronism on that girlish golden head.

But in the meantime he continues his aimless stock-taking of Muriel's artistic belongings. He has done more than half the room, and now comes to a standstill before a quaint old Japanese cabinet, rich in gold-work and black lacquer, which stands in a nook by the picturesque fireplace, with its antique brass grate and blue-and-white tiled hearth. There are two or three other cabinets in the room, but of lighter and more airy design—lovely Italian walnut, inlaid with amber, lapis-lazuli, etc.; but this of Japanese workmanship is more sombre. Its glass-protected shelves contain some beautiful specimens of "eggshell Sèvres," but the lower part is a solid panel and is always locked; never yet has Major Erncliffe seen it open till to-day. Now it stands ajar, and his blank gaze wanders over it unseeingly.

He is just about to turn away; his glance has

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strayed off, for the hundredth time, to the dainty little clock ticking away the lagging minutes on the mantelpiece, when his side-sight (if one may be pardoned the expression) catches the opening, and, urged by some strange impulse which he cannot understand, as curiosity forms no part in his mental composition, he steps forward and pulls open the almost closed door. There is not much to reward intrusive eyes; the cabinet is quite empty, save for a large, somewhat rusty door-key huddled up in one corner—not a very æsthetic object to be so sumptuously lodged!

Aimlessly Leonard takes it out, and swings it on one finger, as he completes his amateur inventory of his sweetheart's costly nic-nacs.

And still Muriel comes not. How tiresomely *exigeant* are those hungry deputations she is interviewing, he thinks impatiently, as he at last subsides into a luxurious reclining chair, that must have been fashioned for the express purpose of wooing slumber for its votaries, as Major Erncliffe is seated in its downy depths but a few minutes—still unconsciously twirling that clumsy key that seems an anomaly amidst the airy, fragile prettinesses, the artistic luxury of Mrs. Varley's dainty sanctum—when all things round him become hazy and uncertain, the room is gradually fading from his gaze. He pulls himself together with a start; he is not sleepy! What absurdity! What could make him sleepy in the middle of the day? He never did such a thing in his life; his eyes even are

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not closed. But even as he denies the possibility, the same dim vagueness steals again over everything; the room and its objects imperceptibly dissolve, as it were, before the eyes he would swear are open; and this time he cannot come back to reality. . . . He is out away upon a deserted staircase, unfamiliar; yet he instinctively knows he is still beneath the roof of Varley Hall, or rather, the two-hundred-year-old Manor House, re-christened, rejuvenated, restored by the millionnaire. But, modernize it as he would, Jacob Varley could not altogether erase—though he might do his best—the seal of time from this old Tudor mansion; and that massive masonry, those many gables, and clustering chimneys, speak of a past in which he and his had no part. However, there were many improvements, which *are* decided improvements on those far-away days, when "comfort" was almost an unknown quantity; and other changes that set one's teeth on edge, from being such sheer and terrible anachronisms. The house had fallen much into decay when bought by old Varley; parts of it were considered almost unsafe; but he had architects and builders to overhaul it, and it was all put in thorough repair, with the exception of these low casement windowed rooms, lying away under the projecting eaves in some of these picturesque gables. These attics—as we moderns call them—were not wanting; there was a plethora of rooms in the great rambling house, and they were left to the mice and mildew, to the rats

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and dry-rot. And yet it is on the staircase leading to those unvisited distant chambers that Major Erncliffe finds himself, in his—what shall we call it?—waking dream.

How dim and gloomy it is, he thinks; surely it must be night. Yes, his only light along those quaint echoing passages, those abrupt curves, and sudden alternate ascents and descents—for this part of the Manor stands as it did in the olden time, and is full of those unexpected staircases, irregular levels, surprise closets, nooks, passages, that the builders of that epoch delighted in—the only gleam that illumines the shrouding darkness, proceeds from a flickering candle carried by some one much in advance of him. He had not noticed this before; but now he sees that some one—a woman—is rapidly traversing these lonely corridors and stairs, and he is following her, though he knows not why he does so. . . . Automatically he pursues that swiftly gliding form, as if compelled by some power outside his own, some invisible influence that he cannot resist. . . . And now he gains somewhat on her, and there is less draught, the flame of the candle is steadier, does not flare so, and surely there is something familiar in that distant flitting figure—strangely familiar. It is—is it not?—yes, surely it is—Muriel! That dainty, graceful shape cannot be altogether disguised, even by the loose, floating, unfamiliar garment she wears. The gold of the rich burnished hair momentarily catches a gleam from the candle,

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and reflects the light with lustrous brightness. Yes, Muriel! and none other. His lips form her name, but no sound is emitted; again and again he tries to shout, to stop her hurried progress. Why need they be chasing thus mysteriously through the darkness? But his voice falls back in his chest with a hollow, murmuring whisper; his power of speech is gone, and he must only go on. He could not turn back, even if he would; he feels drawn forward as by a magnet!

And now she whom he is thus compelled to follow pauses before a closed door in the eastern gable. It is the most remote and distant point from the inhabited part of the house, being a sort of upper wing that extends over outer offices, and seems almost separate from the dwelling house. This particular room looks out upon a paved yard connected with the old laundry offices, and projects so much as to appear, from the outside, something like an excrescence growing on the outer wall.

Leonard, as he listens, hears a key inserted in the rusty lock, which turns with a dismal creak. What possesses Muriel? Where is she going? What is she doing, and at this hour of the night? And while he so thinks, she passes within the chamber, and the door, swinging from her hand, shuts with a dreary, echoing clang. When he reaches it, he fumbles some time with the lock before he can get it to open. When he does at last, and enters, a strange sight meets his gaze. At

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the end of the room, farthest from the door, is the wide old casement-window, and beneath it, kneeling on the dusty, decaying floor, is Muriel Varley, the candle on the ground beside her, and a large piece of the rotten old skirting-board displaced, while her slim white hand is groping in the aperture left. She does not seem to have heard him approach, though the door made much noise. He walks over and stands beside her, but still she is unconscious of his presence; and, looking at her, now that he can see her face—the light from the candle being thrown upon it, and revealing its soft, sweet curves perfectly—he notices, with a sudden fear, that the great blue eyes are fixed and staring, that the whole face is strangely set and vacant; that it is, in fact, the face of a somnambulist! Muriel is asleep; has come to this desolate, unfrequented, remote part of the old Manor House in her sleep—for what purpose? Her waking wishes would never bring her here. She would be frightened, even in the daytime, to penetrate the fastnesses of this somewhat ruined old gable wing, said to be ghost-haunted; much less would she come in the stillness of night—alone! . . . What is she searching for in that rotten wainscot? And even as he so thinks, the little groping hand closes on something and is withdrawn.

He sees something like a glitter of glass, and, stepping forward to look better what the reward is of that mysterious midnight search, his foot touches that piece of dislodged wainscot, which is balanced

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on end against the wall. It falls with a crash, and, with a shrill scream, Muriel wakes; Leonard simultaneously catching her by the hand that holds that unseen something, with no intent of curiosity, but only the desire to reassure and comfort her by his loving proximity. But at that clasp she cries again—a cry of maddened, desperate fear; a convulsive shudder passes over her entire frame, and he sees, while glancing at that now awakened, intelligent face, the light of a hideous, awful horror thereon; eyes that look at him with—what is it?—hate, madness, despair, in their terrified gaze. His grasp of the hand that holds that something unknown tightens involuntarily. "*Never!* I will die first!" she mutters. Then, with a supreme, sudden effort, she wrenches herself free from his clasp, pushing him violently from her with the other hand, with a strange, newborn strength. He loses his balance, and staggers heavily against the window. The rotten woodwork cracks, groans, gapes. Leonard clutches convulsively at nothing! The whole space where the window was, and the crumbling wall beneath, are gone in a moment; there is a rush of cold night air, a sense of falling—falling through a great darkness! And, with this strange physical feeling, Major Erncliffe comes back to life and reality, and finds himself still reposing in Muriel's most seductive of lounging chairs, while Muriel herself is standing beside him, with a scared, startled look in her lovely face.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHADOW OF THE STAIN.

"MURIEL, my darling! Where have you come from? What have you been doing? What is the meaning of it all? Was it a dream, or a vision? I'd swear I wasn't asleep. And yet it was all so horrible!"

"What was horrible, Leonard?" asks Muriel, with pale and trembling lips. "You are talking strangely, and frightening me, dear. I have come in only this minute."

"But where were you?" he reiterates, gazing at her in a sort of blank, bewildered way.

"I was with some of the poor Westerham folk, first in Mrs. Parker's room, and then in the big kitchen. Didn't Marshall tell you? I was sorry to keep you waiting, Lennie love, but I thought you wouldn't mind for once. And such a number of poor creatures came flocking and crowding so eagerly. I saw them in detachments, and made their hearts glad to bursting by all the good things we had ready for them. How delicious it is to have plenty of money, for the mere sake of giving

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abundantly! The rapture, the astonished joy and gratitude, in those hard, toil-worn, half-starved faces was a priceless reward. There is no greater luxury in life, I think, than to be able to give, give, give." She speaks rapidly, nervously, as if she sought to distract him from what troubles him; and she partly succeeds; he smiles, and kisses her passionately.

"You are an angel, my dearest," he murmurs, "with a heart of gold. They have tired you, though, your troublesome pensioners; you look fagged and strangely pale"—looking lovingly and lingeringly at the exquisite young face so near his own.

"It is you who have made me pale, sir; you looked so odd and unnatural, dreaming there in restless trouble, with your eyes more than half open."

"My eyes open! I knew it—I wasn't asleep at all! What the deuce was it? It seemed more like 'mesmerism,' 'clairvoyance,' whatever you call it, than a dream. I have been bewitched, Muriel. I have been through some strange experience, dear, which has left a very unpleasant impression."

"You've had a bad dream, Leonard—simply this, and nothing more; or, perhaps, the old Manor House ghost has visited you, and laid her spell upon you. It's a woman, I believe."

"The ghost of the eastern gable, isn't it?" he says quickly, looking at her suddenly.

She shivers, as if smitten by a chill blast, and

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grows paler even than before. "East or west, I'm sure it doesn't matter. She'd be equally dreadful wherever she promenaded, provided she existed," she says, with a strained smile, and a great effort to appear gay and unconcerned.

"Oh yes, the east gable," continues Leonard, unheeding her words, his eyes looking away from her, distant and dreamy. "I've heard the legend scores of times, and her visible presence forebodes woe and disaster to the inmates. She murdered some one, I believe, a couple of centuries or so ago, —whether husband or lover, history is not quite certain,—murdered them somewhere in that eastern gable, and buried the body beneath the flooring; and she is compelled to haunt the scene of her crime, says superstition. Also tradition says that the blood of her victim gushed out upon her after that fatal stab, and that hair, face, and garments, are streaked and splashed with the ominous red! She was young and beautiful, and—— Ah! perhaps, after all, it was she whom I saw in that extraordinary dream—vision—call it what you will; —yellow hair, floating white draperies, the midnight taper, all the legendary ghost paraphernalia complete, except the blood-stains, and—and yet—— Good heavens! Muriel, my love, what a brute I am to frighten you out of your senses!" he says, as Mrs. Varley sways heavily against him, with closed eyes and ashy face. "My darling, it's all right! Look up, sweet! There's no one here but your own Leonard. Confound me for a drivelling idiot!"

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he exclaims, raining kisses on the soft, tender face, that resumes its sweet warm flesh tints thus fanned back to life. "I had a bad dream, as you say, my dearest; rather a strange dream than an evil one, by the way; and the fact of sleeping at all in the daytime—a misdemeanour of which I never yet was guilty—has unhinged me a little, that's all. We'll go away out of this," he added, looking round the room with an irrepressible slight shudder, "and forget all about it, won't we, pet?" he asked, smiling down reassuringly at the beautiful face resting so contentedly against his shoulder; and Muriel, recovered from her momentary faintness, looks back into his eyes with a wan, loving smile.

"Yes, Leonard, we'll go straight to the library, even though dinner is not served yet, and we will talk of these horrors no more," she whispers; and then she puts up those sweetest, ripest, loveliest lips, to kiss him of her own accord; and he, as he holds her close to his heart, in a passionate mute embrace, silently thanks God for the great blessing of her love, and vows that never again will he allude to that singular, unaccountable experience he has just been through (as he still refuses to believe it was a dream), or to the Manor House ghost.

His darling is a nervous creature, though she bore herself so wonderfully through that most terrible ordeal of a few months ago; but the fearful strain and tension she had undergone during the awful days of the trial, the supreme effort she

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made to keep up, and not seem frightened, has told upon her, of course, is doubtless coming against her now, and has made his "brave, dauntless Muriel," as he loved to call her in the olden days, timid, fearful, afraid of what she would have laughed at a while ago.

And so they leave the room together, and he never misses the large clumsy key that hung upon his finger when he fell into that strange visionary state, never remembers it at all, and consequently does not notice that it is gone. Also he does not remark what might perhaps strike a third person, if he were present, as somewhatsingular—that Muriel asks him no questions as to his dream—what it was about, or what troubled him.

. . . . . .

The library at Varley Hall is the cosiest room in the house, and the whole suite—the great drawing-rooms, dining-room, and breakfast-room of the occupied portion of the old Manor—are alike deserted by the mistress during this period of her widowhood; she scarcely ever enters them, especially the first-named, save when obliged to receive formal ceremonial visits.

Since her husband's death she has almost lived in the library, having all her meals served there, and sitting there through the evening. The room has been always a favourite of hers, since she entered the house a bride more than four years ago. Her pleasantest hours [have] been spent there. Old Jacob Varley had a library, as a

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natural adjunct of a millionnaire, but he had little use or care for it. The retired cotton-spinner delighted rather in his massive dining-room and stately, gorgeous drawing-rooms, and saw nothing to admire within his room of books, save his "darling Murrie," whose lovely face so often shone there, like a rare and beauteous blossom, amidst its sombre surroundings, and whose love for the room and its contents the old man could not understand.

Perhaps Muriel is a wise woman in her generation, and, apart from her love of books and their vicinity, knows that she could not chose a more effective background for her radiant, shining beauty, than these oak-panelled walls, these polished ebony cases, massive oaken mantelpiece, dark-red velvet hangings, and few deep-toned Persian rugs scattered on the otherwise carpetless oak floor. Nowhere else did the rich deep gold of that amber head shine with a more glorious lustre, or the wondrous blue of those dark-fringed eyes look so intensely azure, or the perfect exquisite colouring of that lovely face show to such splendid advantage.

And sombre in hue as the room is, yet Leonard thinks it looks strangely attractive to-night, with a big bright fire burning in the great, wide, old-fashioned hearth, with its ingle nook recessed under the high mantelpiece; for end of April as it is, yet it grows extremely chilly with the declining day; a small octagon table drawn close to it, dainty

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with shimmering glass and glittering silver, choice hot-house flowers, and wax candles under rose-coloured shades, not yet lit; while to complete the picturesqueness of the interior, Muriel's favourite of favourites and prince of pets, "Rupert," a magnificent tawny-haired St. Bernard, lies stretched on the great fur rug in front of the fire.

The room, which is elliptical in form, is lit by one grand oriel window, entirely filling one end of the ellipse. The upper portion of this window is exquisite painted glass, on which are emblazoned the arms and heraldic devices of the noble family to which the house belonged through so many generations, but which is now extinct; and at certain times on bright days, according to the sun's position in the heavens, the room is glorified by slant streaks and dashes of richest colouring from that lovely stained glass.

To-night as Muriel and Leonard enter, the sun is fast sinking in the west, which the window faces. He is almost gone; the glory of the pageant is nearly over; in a few minutes the sky will be grey and cold and tintless; in a few minutes more the gloom of the advancing night will be marshalling its dusky forces in that rose-and-opal sky; but as yet it is all shining brightness, though the great pomp and blazonry of that royal departure is well-nigh past.

Leonard walks to the window to take a farewell look at the monarch of light, sinking into the purple of his kingly couch. He stands so for a

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few moments, and then turns just as the last tiny rim of the day-god is vanishing; he starts most unpleasantly, though he speaks no word; for there before him is Muriel, lying back in a low chair facing the window, with closed eyes (she is feeling somewhat weary after that touch of faintness), and it is as if a stream of blood were pouring over her. The pretty amber-head is streaked and splashed with the crimson tide; one soft cheek and little white hand are dyed with the same fell hue; while all down the dress is the same large splashing streak of red—blood-red!

Leonard catches his breath, and with difficulty represses an exclamation as he gazes, while the horrible legend he has been speaking of—the ghost of the Manor House murderess—rushes back on him with startling force. Never in all the times he has been in this room with Muriel has the light so chanced to fall on her through that beautiful crimson glass. It is gone, that strange appearance, even as he looks—gone with the dipping of that last little bit of the sun below the horizon.

It was absurd of him to be so startled. The effect was singular and unpleasant, but to attach any importance to it is simply lunacy or superstition of the lowest possible order.

Still, scoff at himself as he may, it leaves a cold, nameless, apprehensive impression, in some way entangled with his dream or vision, that mars to an extent his enjoyment of that exquisite little *tête-à-tête* dinner with the woman whom he so pas-

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sionately loves. And this is all the more annoying, as it is not often that he is thus indulged; for, cousin as well as lover though he is, yet Muriel is extremely careful that no tongues, be they ever so censorious, may speak her name lightly, or say that she failed in any way in the respect due to her husband's memory.

And although the world of Westerham may already guess how matters will arrange themselves after a little, yet, meanwhile, she is most cautious not to evoke unkind gossip; and, young and beautiful though she is, none have yet had the hardihood to whisper that Jacob Varley's widow is glad of her freedom, or that it came most opportunely.

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CHAPTER XIV.

AN OMINOUS WHISPER.

THE months glide swiftly away; the spring ripens into loveliest summer, which, in turn, mellows into early autumn; and this, again, gives place to the "fall," as the fading of the year is so truly and poetically styled in the far west. It is the saddest time of all the year, when death and mourning are abroad in the land; nature grieving for her bright-hued children, for the radiance and the golden glory of their lovely lives, and will not be comforted. It is the time of all the year when hurrying humanity should, perforce, stand still a while and ponder; when our miserable mortality has no longer any excuse for not remembering that the autumn of *our* year will come too—is coming with rapid strides, however green and vivid may be the fleeting spring, however luxuriant and vari-coloured the brief, bounteous summer. Autumn is coming surely and steadily to all and each; the chill wind of its advancing breath is felt by many round us; the sad neutral tints of its unmistakable livery are assumed by friend after friend—the tired grey head,

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the bowed form and furrowed cheek, the faded eye and weary, weak, and halting step; and yet we take no warning; and the young, in the joyous, unheeding insolence of their youth, and the middle-aged, in the security and vigour of their maturity, alike disregard these signs and tokens of life's garnered year. *Their* barns are not yet full, nor half full; they are still quite empty. Why, the spring is not nearly over yet; and then there is the whole long, long summer, stretching away in the dim distance, which seems as if it would never end. And yet—it is over, and autumn is here; ay, and the winter of death, in a flash!

'Tis but yesterday, surely, that we were looking out on the tender green of our spring-time; and now, behold, they are the snows of the end! Yes; the late, late autumn, when death, and its twin-brother "decay," are all around one in nature's kingdom, is a very sad and solemn season. And at the very height of this dreary time, when youth and hope and promise seem far off in the past, and sorrow and desolation and a grave seem all that is real in this strange, mystic tangle which we call "life"—in the very last week in November Muriel Varley and Leonard Erncliffe become man and wife.

But the dull grey depression of this most melancholy month affects not the bride's shining beauty, dims not the sweetness of that exquisite face, which seems to have acquired a new transfigured loveliness since she has cast off the shadowing widow's

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cap, that outer seal of affliction which always seemed so incongruous on that young head. For though Muriel is more than four-and-twenty years of age, yet her face has the soft sweet freshness, the bright indescribable radiance, of early, innocent, buoyant youth, and those who see her for the first time find it almost impossible to imagine her a wife, and, above all, a widow, guessing her to have but reached the magic milestone of seventeen. And that one expression that sometimes seemed a little anomalous to that spirit of youth that sat on her brow, that startled look of fright or horror that dwelt in the great appealing blue eyes through the terrible time of the trial, and for months after, and that people said would never more depart from the lovely face, is almost effaced; and a great, ineffable content, a look as if she had at last gained her heart's desire, is her one dominant expression as she walks up the aisle of the dim old church on her father's arm, in the early misty dreariness of the November morning.

All things have been done decently and in order. None can say that she treated her husband's memory with the faintest shadow of disrespect, as just fourteen months have elapsed since his death.

The marriage, too, is the quietest imaginable, everything conducted with the strictest privacy. Muriel and her father walk to the church, scarcely half a mile from her home, in the raw dulness of the early day, the bride in her sober travelling-dress of seal brown; and there at the altar, Major

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Erncliffe, with the light of a great joy in his eyes, his unpleasant impressions of last April long forgotten, awaits them. No bridesmaids, no best man, no guests; Muriel has insisted on its being absolutely private, which delights Leonard, as he would have shrunk horribly from any outward show of merry-making or wedding festivities, partly from the great depth and strength of his love—he feels as if the conventional rejoicings and congratulations, etc., would have jarred detestably, marring the sweet, sacred holiness and happiness, too deep for words, of their union—partly, he would have considered it execrably bad taste, owing to the circumstances of old Varley's death.

Dr. Hilliard, however, would have wished it not quite so remarkably quiet. His daughter is doing no deed of which she need be ashamed. She is marrying a good and noble man who loves her devotedly, who has loved her since she was a mere child, and who has been her cousin and friend all her life—marrying him after a due and proper interval of mourning for the good old man who is gone. That he came to his death unfairly, mysteriously—a mystery that has never yet been actually cleared up—is certain, though, of course, all Westerham has accepted long ago as final, the belief that Richard Varley, the *vaurien* son, incensed by his father's marriage, and the possibility of the birth of a child, who would, he knew too fatally well, inherit all, and exclude himself from any possible share in his father's wealth, he having forfeited by

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his evil life all right and claim to an eldest son's portion, or any portion, when, fortunately, there was no entailed property, and goaded by a desperate present need of money, which the rifled desk and the disappearance of the £1300 proved beyond a doubt, committed that last and terrible crime. But the fact that there was such a crime perpetrated, through which his daughter had been such a terrible, innocent sufferer, was, in Dr. Hilliard's opinion, the very reason why the marriage should not be of this almost clandestine character.

However, Muriel's and Leonard's united wishes overrule his, and perhaps it is as well; for by-and-by, when the ceremony is over, and the newly-married pair have driven straight from the church porch to the railway-station, *en route* for the continent, it begins to be whispered about Westerham that there has been one very strange fact—more than strange, indeed, extraordinary—connected with the wonderfully quiet wedding solemnized in the sickly early daylight of that November day, in that old country church distant from the city; and that was the unaccountable and most singular absence of the bride's mother. Mrs. Hilliard was not present at her daughter's wedding! And even her strange morbid distaste for going abroad of late, her peculiar and suddenly developed desire for utter seclusion, for which the plea of ill health is advanced, seems no valid excuse for acting thus.

It is generally known amongst her friends in Westerham that a great and terrible change has

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been wrought in her since the fearful shock which her nerves sustained fourteen months ago. She and her daughter were the first to reach that bedside after that awful cry. They had confronted each other and death in its most ghastly form, in that never-to-be-forgotten moment before Edwards or any of the rest of the awakened household reached the spot; and it was universally supposed that that awful conclusion to her last visit to Varley Hall had seriously undermined Mrs. Hilliard's health both of mind and body.

Never since that hour had she crossed her daughter's threshold, scarcely had she crossed her own. During the terrible time of the trial, she had held aloof in a strange, cowed, distracted manner, hardly glancing at her child during those awful days of suspense. And yet, when she was not actually ill, confined to her bed, it seemed strange, cruel, barbarous even, as some folks said, that she should have thus absented herself on an occasion like the present. The girl she had so idolized, the daughter she had adored, loved with a self-sacrificing, devoted love; whose lightest wish had been her law, in whose very being she had almost merged her own identity.

An absorbing love for her child had been, in short, Mrs. Hilliard's most marked individuality; and now this singular, unaccountable avoidance! And at last it began to be whispered by one or two ultra-suspicious, slanderous folk, with bated breath and ominous head-shakes, that perhaps

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Mrs. Hilliard had not been quite right in her head this long time back, though none suspected it, and that with this mental aberration her distaste, amounting to dislike in the beginning of the acquaintance, for old Jacob Varley returned with renewed strength. It may have grown on her in some wild, fanatical, vague way that she was appointed to sever the bond which she had been so very reluctant, years ago, should have ever been forged. For it was well known in Westerham that when old Varley, the retired cotton-spinner and millionnaire, first came courting sweet Muriel Hilliard, Mrs. Hilliard had violently opposed even the idea of such a union, although she knew well the state of her husband's affairs just then—his great financial embarrassments, the heavy losses he had recently sustained, that threatened almost to crush him. For the clever, popular physician, who stood at the very top of his profession, whose fame and reputation were great, and his practice far and away the best in Westerham, was a daring, incurable, reckless speculator, which is nothing but being a gambler on a Titanic scale, whose rash and desperately wild investments, that more by good luck than anything else sometimes turned out wonderfully fortunate, almost broke his wife's heart with anxiety as to their result; to him the advent of Jacob Varley in such an unexpected guise seemed almost miraculous.

But the self-abnegating mother-heart felt only for her child. That loveliest girl of nineteen

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summers, in whose winsome beauty the mother had taken an almost sinful pride, was, in order to save her father, to be thrown away on an old man, more than old enough to be her grandfather, and not even a gentleman. It was unnatural, horrible! She for one would never countenance it. Her daughter, with her fair and gracious beauty, was to be defrauded of her woman's heritage of love. Money! What mattered money? Such sale and barter was disgraceful and wicked. Was her Muriel's young and lovely life to be shorn of all joy for the sake of sordid pelf? No; let the three of them sink or swim together. Her husband might, very likely would, retrieve his losses; but at least let her girl have a fair chance of finding happiness.

So Mrs. Hilliard argued hotly and urgently, till she suddenly collapsed, on discovering that her daughter had quite taken her father's view of the case, at which the mother mutely marvelled, guessing as she did how matters were between Muriel and her soldier cousin; but she said no word of dissuasion after that; and by-and-by she became quite reconciled to Jacob Varley—indeed, much more than reconciled; she grew apparently to respect and love the good old man, as she could hardly fail to do, seeing his great and dog-like devotion to her child.

But those who now spoke in dark whispers, suggested that possibly her mind may have been getting queer this long time; that her old feelings

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towards her daughter's husband may have revived and increased to giant-like growth, fed by the fatal fever of insanity; and that then, taking advantage of Richard Varley's hurried visit, and his desperate need of money, proved by the rifling of his father's desk, which was discovered some hours before the murder, she had, with the strange subtlety so often evinced by the insane, laid her plans so that the added crime of murder would be naturally imputed to the evil man who rushed from the house half frantic with rage and disappointment—rushed to his death, though he knew it not. But, bad as he was, perhaps drowned, Richard Varley had not this last and most terrible guilt to answer for; and that by-and-by, when "the sea gives up its dead," and the "secrets of all hearts are known," it will be found that though "few and evil were his days," yet that that erring soul was not red with his father's blood.

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CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING LIKENESS.

MONTHS pass away, and the bride and bridegroom still remain abroad. Muriel is, in fact, reluctant to return at all, if it were possible for her to remain away. She candidly avows that Varley Hall has become hateful to her, and the thought of living there abhorrent. But at last she yields to her father's entreaties who,—bereft of both daughter and nephew, whom he loves as a son, he is indeed desolate,—yearns to have his child near him once more; and they return late in November, after just a year's absence. Leonard secretly rejoicing, though, for Muriel's sake, he has done his best to conceal his longing for home and England, and his weariness and distaste for foreign life. She had seemed so radiantly happy amidst these new scenes and surroundings; her love for himself and delight in his individual society so unbounded, so profound and tireless, that he hesitated to suggest a change that might mar or shadow the blissful heaven of their lives. But yet, when she herself proposes their home-coming, he is unfeignedly

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glad. And in the first excitement of the return, Muriel seems bright and joyous as ever.

They fill the house with guests for Christmas, chiefly Major Erncliffe's friends, as Muriel does not care much to cultivate the Westerham *élite*, who had elected to patronize her, and whom she had somewhat snubbed ; and old Varley's few intimates she calmly ignores—men whose interests are centred in, and bounded by, the state of the money-market; whose talk was interlarded with strange cabalistic phrases, such as "Cotton is firm," etc., or, again speculations on the mystic fluctuations of "stock" —those erratic, inscrutable rises and falls that seem so like wizardry to the hapless uninitiated, and magic malign indeed when *it* suddenly collapses and engulfs the novice.

It—that indefinite *it*, that is nothing graspable or tangible ; that is something, and that yet we are told is nothing; and that men who understand the mysteries surrounding that invisible sphinx-like goddess, who sits enthroned somewhere in the central core of the commercial world; who is not, and yet is ;—men on 'Change, who are versed in the rites and ceremonies of this peculiar form of mammon worship, and who can mutter the proper incantation at the proper moment ; men who, in short, are behind the scenes,—can make colossal fortunes in a few days, possibly hours, by the simple interchange of bits of paper, that have, if we are truly informed, neither value nor meaning, and represent absolutely nothing.

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No; old friends, whether her own or her first husband's, Muriel does not desire; but Major Erncliffe's receive warmest welcome, and she is the radiant, animating spirit of the party. She looks more gloriously lovely than ever, and her actual idolatry of her husband, continually evinced in word and glance and tone (unconsciously, for she would sensitively shrink from parading the strength of her affection), has lent to her face an infinite, almost pathetic tenderness, which spiritualizes her beauty, giving it the one finishing touch which makes it perfect.

In these strangers' eyes she seems the very incarnation of love itself—trusting, innocent, absolute love. They are also much struck by the remarkable resemblance she bears to the family with which she is so remotely connected; feature by feature she seems to reflect these dead and gone Beresfords, who appear to gaze down mournfully at these aliens in the home of their race, from the walls of the dim, shadowed picture-gallery. Especially is her wonderful likeness to the last of that dead race, the lovely, gentle Eunice Beresford, commented upon. That sweet, beautiful, tender face glowing upon the canvas, in the freshness of its winsome youth, and that other no less exquisite countenance in the flesh, are surely identical. Many think that this portrait must be Muriel's, and that for some pretty caprice, some arch, wild fancy, she arrayed herself in these old-world garments, and dressed her glorious hair in the fashion of nearly fifty years ago.

But one old gentleman who is among the guests, the representative of an old county family, who knew the Beresfords well, and whose memory can easily clear the half century, declares that the picture is indeed that of the dead and gone Eunice, as he remembers its being painted; but that Mrs. Erncliffe now, in the glory and perfection of her beauteous womanhood, is almost an exact reflection of what Eunice Beresford was fifty years ago, before the blight fell that for ever shadowed her life and her beauty.

Thus singularly, in distant offshoots of families, do marvellous likenesses appear, or strange peculiarities of either mind or body crop up after long intervals, and are somewhat puzzling and incomprehensible.

Dr. Hilliard and Major Erncliffe have often noticed Muriel's remarkable resemblance to the Beresford family—judged, at least, by their presentments on the walls of the picture-gallery (which, of course, they had never imagined till Muriel had entered the house as mistress, some half-dozen years ago, not having before seen those portraits); but never have they seen it so accentuated as now.

The extraordinary likeness to Eunice Beresford, since Muriel's face assumed this later aspect of pathetic, tender love, seems to increase daily, and is sometimes almost startling in its astonishing vividness; and Arnold Dysart, who is one of the guests, takes a deep, unflagging interest in this strange fact.

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He will stand before the picture in reverie long and profound; he studies it at all points—it is exquisitely painted by a master hand—taking note of every smallest detail of that lovely expressive face, expressive even in its perpetual wearing of one expression, which is all the artist—genius though he may be—can stamp upon the canvas. And then he will seek his hostess, and watch her intensely, though furtively. And sometimes a great strange eagerness, verging on amazement, dawns on his face, but is instantly repressed.

. . . . . .

He, scientist, psychologist and all, as he is, is voted a decided acquisition to the house-party. He is nothing of a kill-joy. Pleasant, cordial, genial, he enters into every little passing interest or amusement, with a quiet zest and earnestness almost wonderful in one whose thoughts so often wander in such inaccessible regions. He and Major Erncliffe are fast friends, and, but that Professor Dysart was absent from England at the time, Leonard would have confided to him the singular dream, or vision, he had in Muriel's boudoir in the April preceding his marriage. But that dream—for he had long ago come to the conclusion that it *was* a dream, strange and unaccountable, but still only a dream—has now almost faded from his memory, and he scarcely remembers it, and consequently never mentions it, much as they discuss all such phenomena; which is perhaps unfortunate, as Arnold Dysart might discern, at

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least, some strange prophetic warning in that peculiar vision—might discover in it the clue to some unsolved mystery.

All the other guests are delighted with the Professor, and declare that he in his own person does more to make a three weeks' visit to a country house in mid-winter—when the snow is a foot deep, and yet no chance of skating, from continual slight thaws followed by fresh snow-falls—a success than all the rest of them put together. And yet all that he does is to relate strange, eerie stories, weird tales, unearthly experiences that he has amassed from many sources, some from the very "Psychical Society" itself, and that all possess the one great and surpassing charm of being founded on absolute facts.

And each evening, as the hour grows late, the small brilliant group of men and women will forsake their dancing or charade playing, the billiard-room or music-room, and crowd round Arnold Dysart to listen, fascinated, while he tells some fresh singular story of "Mysticism," or "Dream-Science," or discusses some problem of the "Hidden Life."

And none seem more enthralled than Muriel. That instinctive craving all we poor mortals have to thin, or lessen ever so slightly, the density of the veil that hangs between the known and the unknown—a veil that we feel unconsciously is often lifted, but that our eyes are sealed so fast by earth as not to see it rise—is peculiarly accentuated in his wife's sensitive, highly-strung nature,

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thinks Major Erncliffe, in his loving, almost foolish solicitude, as he watches the great eyes darken and dilate as she hangs, spellbound, upon the Professor's words.

Muriel has grown somewhat nervous lately, he thinks, apt to start suddenly, without any apparent cause, to shiver and look about her with a scared, hurried glance of dread. Dysart's mysticism does not agree with her, he thinks; but when he speaks so to Dr. Hilliard, his father-in-law, who is one of the Professor's warmest admirers—the clever physician, with a bias for brain-study, taking especial delight and interest in all brain and thought phenomena adduced by the occultist—he scoffs at the suggestion.

"Harm her, indeed!" he says. "Dysart's society would only do her and the world at large—the world of women especially—an immensity of good, by giving them something novel and interesting to think of. Nothing is so injurious to the mind of man or woman as to be compelled by circumstances to run in one or more certain regulation channels; to be obliged to think only in certain given directions; to be so situated in life, by the press of outward things, that when the mind wanders of itself, as a thinking, cultivated understanding must and will, into unfamiliar paths, other than those beaten, tiresome tracks prepared for it, the possessor of the weary errant will, that yearns and sickens for fresh mental pabulum, must, perforce, summon it from its little excursive ex-

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ploration, and chain it once more to its old thought mill-wheel, least those small mind rambles might unfit, or make grow absent, the weary brain for the monotonous work which it *must* do, the unbroken, undeviating path which it *must* follow. Yes," continues Dr. Hilliard, waxing energetic, "for men and women who have mind—that priceless and greatest of all good gifts—to be so let and hindered and hampered in their mental life, is, in truth, a misfortune and a misery. Of course, I speak only of cases where the mind chafes at the restraint put upon it, and rebelliously seeks to break its chains; and in such cases it would be almost better for the owner of that mind to let it have its freedom, as compulsory work, whether mental or physical, is never so well done as when the heart is in the labour.

"As to Muriel, you are much too anxious about her. My darling girl never seemed so bright and strong—wonderfully so, in the circumstances; and a little nervousness is only to be expected.

"I think Professor Dysart is an acquisition to your house-party, of whom you ought to be very proud, Leonard; he is the most interesting fellow that I have ever met. I often heard you speak of him, but never imagined he was a man of such immensely wide culture, and familiarity with subjects outside the ordinary range."

"Yes, sir; and it is this very familiarity with those mystic subjects that might make him a particularly dangerous companion for a sensitive,

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highly-organized nature. If Arnold Dysart were but a clever, skilful narrator of what we somewhat vulgarly term 'ghost stories,' more or less ingenious, I should only laugh at them and him, and any credulous minds who were impressed by his mental sleight-of-hand. Conjuring, whether by the finger or the tongue, would have little effect on me, and I should have still less sympathy with would-be converts to the impostor's creed. But round all Dysart tells us there palpitates the ever-visible halo of truth—weird, mystical truth—but still truth. And it is this fact which would have the telling, and possibly disastrous effect upon some natures.

"I'm very fond of Dysart, and, except yourself, uncle, there is no man for whom I have so great an affection; but, even apart from his startling psychical theories, his beliefs or religious views are strange and singular, and might possibly lead one whose faith was not extraordinarily strong and vigorous to falter, to question, to lose its hold on the sweet old satisfying creed that has hitherto upheld, and been all-sufficing. Heaven knows, I'm no sectarian or dogmatist, attaching, perhaps, too little value to special form, though, indeed, I have noble examples for any laxity I may evince in such matters. Wasn't it Gordon, our grandest and most heroic Christian soldier of these latter, or, indeed, any days, who received the Sacrament more than once in the Greek church, and wrote, I believe, to a Roman Catholic priest for his prayers?"

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"And why not?" interpolates Dr. Hilliard quickly. "Are not the prayers of any good man, who believes in, reveres, adores the God of the Christian, let his rite of worship be what it may, equally beneficial to the creature prayed for, and equally acceptable to Him to whom those prayers are addressed? I should be sorry to think otherwise; I should feel myself guilty of unpardonable, sinful presumption, in assuming that mine, and mine only, was the form of worship tolerated by the Most High, especially when we recollect that nowhere in the sacred Book, least of all in the New Testament, is there laid down any fixed rule or command that is to regulate the manner or form of the creature's instinctive adoration of the Creator. And I have often thought that this is a point not sufficiently recognized or acknowledged by the believers in revealed religion. There is no formula of worship enjoined upon believing man in the inspired writings; there is no law for him to break, no statute for him to disobey. Consequently, how wicked, how heinously presumptuous it is of us to declare, '*Thus* shall ye worship, and be saved,' or 'Thus shall ye worship, and be eternally lost!' Pah! it's unwarrantable, sickening, blasphemous intolerance!" And Dr. Hilliard, who speaks with rapid, excited utterance, having touched on a subject on which he feels strongly, pauses for breath, thereby allowing Leonard to complete his more or less broken speech.

"Ah, yes, that's all very well, and I feel much

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with you; I abhor illiberalism of any kind, above all, in matters pertaining to religious conviction. But Dysart, you know, has steeped himself in, and absorbed many of these strange modern notions, that seem to me the outcome more of an unwholesome straining after some new sensation, something odd and singular, something that will excite a jaded fancy, rather than real, honest, downright belief. They are the feverish imaginations of a weakened, diseased brain—the brain of our nation, that, I fear, is fast leaving its virile stage behind, and entering that on which all great kingdoms must perforce pass through, before they reach the final one of decay and collapse. . . . Superlative luxury, superlative immorality, and superlative infidelity, are the fatal three that indicate the decline and fall of nations. It has been so; and why not again? Other kingdoms have risen, culminated, and set; why not ours?

"Beyond a certain pinnacle of greatness man or nations cannot go; all that comes after must, in the mystic order of the trinity that pervades all things, be inferior. . . . Incipiency, power, decay! forenoon, noon, afternoon! That land where it is always afternoon is a pleasant land, where live the lazy Lotus-eaters; but it is more the land of retrogression than advance. Are we entering it? . . . Under the brilliant, glittering mantle of our high-pressure civilization and supernal culture, are there the first faintest hints of the putrescence that will develop by-and-by? You think I speak

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wildly, uncle ; perhaps I do ; but I'm not caught by new-fangled ideas. I like to cling to the old things—above all, the old faith, that we have tested, and not found wanting, and that, after nearly nineteen hundred years, springs as green and fresh as it did on the first wondrous Easter morning.

"Dysart is the best fellow in the world, and, in spite of his strange theories, is, I believe, a thorough Christian—the two are quite compatible to a great intellect, a strong, comprehensive mind ; but what I fear a little is, that to one not so endowed by nature, where the brain-power is weaker, and the imaginative faculties are much accentuated—a sensitive, nervous organism, in fact, like Muriel's—that there might be danger. She is so strangely fascinated by his mystical talk, and——"

"Ah, Leonard, take care, take care!" breaks in Dr. Hilliard, with a laugh ; "don't blind yourself. I think it's Dysart the man you dread, after all, not Dysart the metaphysician. But, indeed, lad, you need have no fear. My little girl has no thought or care, I verily believe, for creature on this earth, save your own big, foolish self. Her old dad she just tolerates, and as to her mother —— Well, that's an inscrutable mystery! The daughter'd be loving enough, I'd take my oath, if she were let. But—Rachel—I cannot understand her—the child she almost worshipped.

"I suppose you could have no slightest inkling of the reason of your aunt's extraordinary conduct, Leonard? She always loved you, so the marriage

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could not have displeased her; besides, the strange change of feeling to our girl set in long before. I seek in vain for a cause, and the only one that suggests itself to me is so horrible that I don't like to allow myself to dwell on it." And the elder man pushes back his hair with a nervous, tremulous gesture, as he somewhat narrowly scans the face of the younger.

"And that is——" speaks Major Erncliffe, with slow enunciation, gazing steadfastly into his uncle's eyes, while his bronzed cheek blanches slightly.

But at that moment Muriel and two or three of her lady guests enter the library, where the preceding conversation has taken place, and Leonard's half-uttered question remains unfinished and unanswered.

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CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE STILLNESS OF THE NIGHT.

"I HAVE been just telling Professor Dysart," cries one of them, a bright, winsome girl of twenty, Leonard's young sister and only very near relative: thirteen years younger than her brother, she has been considerably spoiled by him, and Muriel now is doing her best to complete the process. The girl's home has hitherto been with a rather austere maiden aunt, in whose charge she was left some fifteen years ago by her dying father; but in another year she will be twenty-one, and her own mistress, and Muriel declares that she must then reside with them altogether—"I have been just telling Professor Dysart," she exclaims gaily, "that he must give us his very best and most creepy story to-night—Christmas Eve, you know"—with a nod of the pretty roan head; "the traditional night for a ghost *séance*. What a weird, unaccountable custom it is, by the way," she continues, with a pretty air of moralizing, "that links indissolubly superstitious horrors with the season of 'peace and good will!' It seems almost something of a

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paradox—doesn't it? Festivity and phantoms! However, the lamentable fact remains that we look for ghosts at Christmas, as surely as we look for plum-pudding. But isn't it shabby—I mean of Professor Dysart, not of the ghosts, poor things; they must pass their spectral existence in a perennial condition of shabbiness, for we have never yet heard even of the most advanced modern ghost having got its 'new clothes on.'"

"Nell, Nell, you bad child! You grow more incorrigible daily. When will you learn respect for anything or any one?" asks her brother, with an indulgent smile, while the others laugh at the arch girl's saucy jesting.

"Well, a shade is not 'any one;' and who respects shadows?" she retorts, with a roguish gleam in the bright, speaking, hazel-grey eyes.

"But how has Professor Dysart won your disapprobation, Nell?" asks Muriel. "You have been loud in his praise hitherto; though why you are so eager for his stories, I can't imagine. While you are listening you are all creeps and shivers, and neglect none of the pantomime expressive of intense and fearful appreciation; and yet the last word has scarcely passed his lips, when you are as volatile as ever, almost chaffing the horrors you shuddered at a moment before."

"And why not?" argues Nell Erncliffe vehemently. "Take my word for it, Muriel, the best way to exorcise phantoms, whether real or imaginary, substance or shadow—let it be trouble, or

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only an intrusive spectre, whose *metier*, after all, is generally tolerably harmless—is to laugh at them. Laugh long and loudly, believe in the efficacy of your own laughter, and they, the unpleasant visitants, will believe in it too, and will scurry away, and your fears along with them."

"Brava, Nell! you're growing almost as metaphysical as Dysart himself," laughs her uncle, Dr. Hilliard; and the girl, somewhat ashamed of her small outburst, colours, and goes on hastily—

"What I mean by Professor Dysart's being shabby is, when I asked him wouldn't he give us his very best to-night, something awfully impressive and ghastly, you know, he said—just fancy, how disappointing!—that he feared he had quite exhausted his small stock of real authentic mysteries; that a supply of genuine, unaccountable, weird stories was not, as I appeared to imagine, inexhaustible, but, on the contrary, extremely limited. Occultism and the mystic problems of 'The Hidden Life' offered, he said, an immense field for discussion and argument, in which he would be happy to take a prominent part, and impart a portion of the small wisdom he has acquired; but if Mrs. Erncliffe—he especially dwelt on Mrs. Erncliffe—insisted on a story again to-night, he should fall back upon a very singular and startling experience of his own, or rather, perhaps, he should say his father's, though some of the extraordinary phenomena did come under his own observation as a boy; and that's

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what I call shabby of him. Every one knows when it comes to 'personal experience' how flat, stale, and unprofitable the story or anecdote is almost sure to prove. The very prefacing words, indicating that the 'ego' is responsible for the coming tale, impresses one with a damp chilliness and general depression which the result is almost inevitably sure to warrant."

"That couldn't be the case with Professor Dysart, I feel convinced," remarks Muriel decisively. "I should be rather inclined to think it will be quite the other way, and that the Professor's own experience will be quite the best thing in his repertoire. You deserve to be banished from the charmed circle to-night, Nell, for your shocking heresy and want of faith in our apostle of mysticism."

Muriel speaks lightly and laughingly; but her cheek is flushed, and Leonard fancies he detects an eagerness in her tone not habitual. And then his unlucky young sister, influenced by some malign spirit of mischief, says, unconsciously, the very last thing she should say, and earns thereby her brother's great and silent wrath.

"Well, Muriel, if you have such great and perfect faith in the satisfying nature of 'personal' strange experiences, why don't you recount your own? I mean, of course"—with a half-frightened catch in her breath, on noticing the sudden, horrible scowl on Leonard's face, and the wild, strange terror that flashes out on Muriel's, vanishing almost instantly,

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but leaving a great and singular pallor behind—"the intimate personal knowledge of ghosts, and the somewhat irrational, startling habits of that 'peculiar people' that you must have acquired during your long residence here at Varley Hall. Every one knows that the house is reputed to be haunted; and surely you must have seen or heard something. In fact"—with a little nervous laugh, for the girl is beginning to be startled, the look in her sister-in-law's face is so strange—"I sometimes think you must be a ghost yourself—the ghost of Eunice Beresford. You are so absurdly like her picture; and if——"

. . . . . .

But the girl's silly words end abruptly. There is a wild little strangled cry from Muriel, who steps backwards with an ashen face, and both hands thrown out in front of her, as if warding off some physical or mental horror, her eyes gazing, as it were, on something that the others cannot see!

Her husband and father both rush to her side, but the sudden movement seems to rouse her. She starts and looks around dazedly, and then sinks into a low chair, sobbing softly, also muttering strangely, though her words seem to have no meaning for the ears they reach.

"I know it—I have been guessing it this long time. . . . She and I are one! . . . What does it mean, that dreadful mystery? . . . That picture! Yes; that picture. I have whispered the secret to

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it, and it has not denied it. . . . It looks at me, and I look at it and speak to it, and yet we are the same. . . . Eunice and I—not two, but one! . . . And there's another—a third. I feel and know she's often near me. . . . She! Who is that she? Tell me who she is?"—with a sudden gesture of imploring appeal to the two distracted men, who gaze at her in astonished non-comprehension.

This last is the only sentence they have clearly heard, the rest being too muffled and indistinct; owing to her face being buried in her hands; and now it seems as if she were gone a little mad. Whom is she talking of?

"An influence in the air, that seems to draw you, and compel you, and that you cannot fight against; and she and *it* are one. . . . I told it to the picture; but it only said, with a sorrowful moan, 'We all three are one.'"

And she lapses back into the low, pitiful sobbing; and the men look at her, and at each other, and Leonard whispers the familiar, trenchant phrase—

"I told you so."

Then after a little they all leave her to her husband, whom she seems to wish to be alone with. And a few hours later, when they meet at dinner, Muriel seems brilliant, radiant, joyous as ever; though Leonard cannot help fancying, in his intense anxiety, that there is a feverish restlessness, eagerness, and strange, nervous watchfulness under her assumed gaiety. But Doctor Hilliard tells him

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he may make his mind quite easy; that attacks of nervousness or hysteria are quite natural in Muriel's present state of health.

And when Leonard argues, with a troubled face, that it wasn't mere hysteria, but that it quite seemed as if his darling's mind was wandering for that few minutes in the library, his uncle smiles reassuringly, saying—

"It was simply a fantastic fancy that took hold of her for a moment, my dear boy, believe me. She has been hearing much of her likeness to that picture lately; and then naughty Nell's wild words about her being the ghost of that pictured Eunice struck her, in her present weakened, nervous state, with a strange weird thrill, and overcame her a little. She confessed as much to me an hour or two ago. Perhaps you were right, and that Dysart's mysticism is not very good for her just now. It is as well, possibly, that he has come to the end of his repertoire. I don't fancy we'll find his 'own experience' very terrifying. You see, Nell has inoculated me with her pessimistic views in that direction."

And Doctor Hilliard laughs cheerfully as he turns to give his arm to the lady committed to his charge, on hearing the magic formula, "Dinner is served," solemnly pronounced by the stately, dignified butler, who, on the strength of having lived last in a nobleman's family, feels somewhat patronizingly towards his present employers; while Leonard mutters *sotto voce*—

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"His own experience, or anybody's else's, shall not be told, if I can prevent it."

. . . . . .

But Major Erncliffe's wishes are overruled.

By-and-by, when his guests gather round Professor Dysart, in full expectation of receiving at his hands, or rather, from his lips, the pleasure they have almost grown to regard as habitual, and their prescriptive right, none are so urgent as Muriel that he should recount the strange experience he spoke of to Nell Erncliffe earlier in the day; and though her husband does his best to combat her entreaties, without being actually uncourteous to Dysart and the others, he cannot forbid the narration of the incident, whatever it may be. And so, comforting himself with the belief that doubtless Nell and her uncle were right, and that the forthcoming horrors will prove to be of a tame and milk-and-watery type, he adjourns to the billiard-room with one or two men who have no very pronounced taste for the mystical. And the last thing he hears, as he leaves the room, is his wife's voice, saying to a lady near her—these two are seated in a somewhat shadowed corner some little distance from the brilliant, animated group near the fire—

"It is sure to be something good. His father was a wonderful traveller—Desmond Dysart, the celebrated archæologist, you know; and, doubtless, this is some marvellous experience of his in some wild, distant land."

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And then he hears no more, for the door closes behind him; but Arnold Dysart caught these last few words, and he smiles strangely as he says—

"No, Mrs. Erncliffe, my story has nothing to do with foreign lands; it is, rather, very near home—so near, in fact, as to be *in* your home! Yes, ladies and gentlemen," he said, looking round on the slightly astonished faces of the Major's guests, "the story I propose to tell, with Mrs. Erncliffe's permission—indeed, she has been the most urgent that I should relate this weird and singular episode in my father's life—is altogether connected with this old Manor House of the Beresford family, under whose roof you are now assembled, and treats of the last two representatives of that now extinct race; especially of the good, sweet, and lovely Eunice, whose portrait you know so well, and to which our charming hostess bears so astonishing a resemblance."

Nell glances with frightened eyes at her sister-in-law, remembering the scene in the library a few hours ago. Muriel is deadly pale, with something of a rigid, fixed look in the soft, beautiful face, but otherwise she makes no sign of being affected by the Professor's words, and the girl hopes that all is right, though she feels regretful now at having helped to urge him to tell this tale, that she is sure "is not going to be a bit nice." "It's not good form of Professor Dysart," she thinks a wee shade resentfully, "to sit down coolly to tell horrible stories about one's own house;" and she shivers

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unpleasantly, and glances round her with a newborn feeling of dread that is decidedly disagreeable.

"It's very possible that you may have heard, Mrs. Erncliffe," resumes Arnold Dysart, apparently glancing at Muriel for the first time since he began to speak, though he has furtively kept a keen watch upon her slightest variation of expression; but, unfortunately, she is in the shadow, and he cannot see her as clearly as he would wish—"it is very possible that you may have heard of the weird and terrible ordeal that Eunice Beresford passed through on this night some six or seven and twenty years ago; of the awful manifestation that was made to her on that Christmas Eve, and the strange, incomprehensible phenomena of the mystic violin. Perchance you have even heard the unearthly music of that spectral violin sound from the eastern gable—that terrible gable, that enshrines so mysterious and deadly a secret; a secret that——"

But the Professor's sentence remains unfinished, and his story untold, much to the chagrin of some present; for suddenly there is a shrill, wild, terrified cry, and the next instant Muriel lies prone and unconscious on the carpet, and scared confusion and distress reigns where all had seemed tranquil and serene.

She is carried to her room, and there remains insensible for an hour or more, to Leonard's startled dismay; while her father, in spite of his professional coolness and familiarity with all

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species of nervous seizure, cannot altogether disguise his anxiety.

When she does recover consciousness she appears to them wandering and incoherent, muttering in the same wild, unmeaning way as in the library in the afternoon—

"The secret of the gable! Has it *two* secrets? . . . How did he know of it? . . . The ghost of the eastern gable; that's what people say; but never the *secret;* and yet . . . he never could have guessed *that!* . . . That awful night, all those years ago. Yes, I seem to have a faint memory of it, as across a great gulf of time, as one hazily remembers the things of a dream. Perhaps it was a dream! . . . *I* and Eunice . . . one and the same! . . . How could such a terrible thing be? And yet . . . I feel it is. . . . And the violin! . . . Two or three times I woke in the middle of the night and heard a violin playing; oh, so far away it seemed; and yet it was clear and distinct, as if in the next room; and I said I was sure that it was somewhere in the house; but Jacob laughed, and called me a little goose, and said it was some young fellow walking out home from Westerham, and playing as he went for company."

. . . . . .

So she murmurs on for a little while, and Leonard's heart grows cold and sick with fear; they seem so like the ravings of insanity or delirium. But Dr. Hilliard feels more easy now that she has recovered from her prolonged swoon. Her nerves are terribly

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shaken, evidently; but still he hopes that all will be well. After a time she grows quite quiet and rational; but she is strangely silent, and there is a feverish, restless light in the great shining azure eyes that he does not like.

Tranquil, refreshing sleep is the best medicine for her, and he determines that she shall have it artificially, as there is not much chance of her winning natural slumber to-night. And so, reluctantly, he calls the magic chloral to his aid—that sorcerer that is so terrible a foe when we get to know him well, so sweet a friend while still comparatively a stranger—and just before two o'clock she falls into a deep, profound sleep.

After watching half an hour longer, and all seeming calm and peaceful, Dr. Hilliard—anxious father though he is—weary and worn-out with his arduous professional duties in Westerham, whence he went and came out to Varley Hall two or three times that day, and knowing that he has a fatiguing day before him on the morrow, even though it be Christmas Day, having been sent for to visit a patient who lives some fifteen miles away, and to whom he must ride or drive, as no train will run to-morrow, makes up his mind to snatch a few hours' rest. His room is in the same corridor, but a few yards off, and so he shall be quite within call.

Leonard declares his intention of not lying down all night; he will remain where he is, active, waking, watchful.

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He is not quite alone in his vigil, as Mrs. Page, good soul, Muriel's old nurse, the recalcitrant witness at the trial, is comfortably ensconced in an armchair by the fire; but she has been tranquilly slumbering for nearly an hour, and her gentle, whispering snores are the only sounds that break the intense stillness that seems to reign all round him, as, seated in the shadowed room, after the doctor's departure, Leonard looks about, with a little feeling of loneliness, or eeriness—which is it? And yet how absurd! In this handsome, luxurious, familiar room, with its glowing red fire and shaded lamp, with his sleeping wife and sleeping servant so near, how could he possibly feel either?

He gives himself a little shake, tosses off a glass of green chartreuse, and then opens a book that lies at his elbow; but whether it is that he finds the book (a volume of Herbert Spencer belonging to the Professor) dull, or that the Chartreuse is more soporific in its effects than he imagined, it is but little past three o'clock when he, too, falls heavily asleep, weary with intense anxiety and watching. And for another hour no sound save the soft breathings of the many sleepers, in their various chambers, breaks the profound stillness in that great old echoing mansion.

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But about four o'clock, just when the winter night is at its very darkest, through those wide, lofty corridors, those great staircases, those spacious chambers, come stealing, soft and low, yet vibra-

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tingly clear and distinct, the notes of a violin—horribly, supernaturally distinct, in contrast with the apparent distance the sound has to travel!

And that mystic music sighs, and sobs, and plains, and sometimes shrieks through the thick gloom of the night; now dying away among the massive timbers of the great old Manor House roof; now swelling in murmurous cadence, and seeming to fill with unearthly harmony all the air around.

And of those many sleepers three or four waken and hear those awful, mysterious strains; and those few, with one exception, cower and shiver in the darkness, and draw up the bed-clothes over their heads, and feel faint with terror as they remember Professor Dysart's allusion to the ghostly violin and the eastern gable, and think with horror that, to-morrow being Christmas Day, they can't possibly leave this terrible house till the day after. Yet *how* are they to endure another night under its haunted roof?

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But that one exception is Professor Dysart himself. He, too, wakes and hears that phantom music; but coupled with the natural human awe of all things unearthly, of any startling and unaccustomed manifestation of the occult spiritual powers that surround us, any tiniest temporary rift in the thick cloud of materialism that shuts our earthly eyes and ears to the mysteries that encompass us—blent with this involuntary shrinking

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dread is a great and eager interest and curiosity. . . . He alone knows something of the meaning of the mystery of that weird music. He has never expected to hear it with his own ears, as he has never expected to be a guest in this strange, mystical old house, that he knows to have so startling a history; and yet how singularly things come to pass.

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He does now what his father did a quarter of a century before: he springs from his bed, and goes to the door of his room to hearken to that wild, wailing sound. Out into the long corridor he gazes, with eyes dilated with an eager awe. . . . Nothing to be seen; . . . darkness profound, inscrutable; only that terribly unearthly music filling all the air, sobbing, sighing, moaning—now at your ear, though soft and low; now more distant; anon creeping and stealing in regions far away above one's head. . . . Away! Ah yes, away in that remote eastern gable. . . . That is the point from which the sounds proceed, concludes the Professor, as he softly paces along the corridor in the impenetrable gloom that is only faintly broken by the ray of light from his open door.

Is it a sign, he wonders, with a shuddering thrill of excitement, that the prophetic curse is working? . . . And then again he thinks, do Major Erncliffe and his wife hear that supernatural music, and how do they regard it? Is any one waking in all that vast space within those grey old walls but himself?

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He moves along, feeling his way to the end of the long corridor in which his room is situated, and then at right angles with it, is the corridor in which are the apartments which the Erncliffes occupy. Gazing along its shadowed length, he sees one small stream of light piercing the intense darkness ; it is from Dr. Hilliard's room, where the tired physician is sleeping with open door, fearing he may be summoned to his daughter's side. But neither he nor any one else appears to be disturbed by those eerie strains ; and the Professor retraces his steps lingeringly, brave man as he is, and possessed by almost a devouring curiosity with regard to that phantom music, that awful ghostly violin and its mystic player. Still, like his father six and twenty years before, he has not courage enough to seek to run it to earth, to penetrate the fastnesses of that eastern gable.

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PART III.

THE PROPHECY FULFILLED.

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting ;
The soul that rises with us (our Life's star)
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar."

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE MANOR HOUSE PHANTOM AGAIN VISIBLE.

AMONG these startled sleepers was Nell Erncliffe, and none were more terrified than the daring, saucy girl. Yet she does not venture to mention the subject to her brother, when she finds by furtive, well-directed questioning that he knows nothing of the extraordinary phenomenon of the night. For, by a strange coincidence, the two who are really concerned in the weird manifestation of that unearthly music heard it not. Leonard, in the first sleep of exhaustion, after great mental anxiety, did not wake; and Muriel, sleeping the sleep induced by the narcotic, was unconscious of all. Neither is Dr. Hilliard aware of anything singular having occurred in the night. And of the few who did hear, and trembled as they heard, none cared to enlighten these three, who appear to be the chief actors in this uncanny Manor House drama. The fact of Muriel being still ill and invisible closes these people's lips, but they talk among themselves. And those who did not hear the phantom strains of that ghostly violin, are

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told of it by those who did. And though inclined at first to be incredulous, and ascribe it to excited fancy engendered by the Professor's strange introduction to the tale which he had been about to tell last night, when Mrs. Erncliffe had been so suddenly and oddly smitten with mysterious illness, still the united and persistent testimony of these three or four at last has its weight; and a more miserable Christmas Day is rarely spent than that passed in Varley Hall by those unfortunate guests, compelled by decency to remain for another twenty-four hours, yet thinking the morrow will never come, when they will have a fair and valid excuse for departure on account of their hostess's indisposition.

With quaking hearts they seek their respective rooms at night, and little sleep visits their eyelids; but the hours of darkness bring no weird manifestation on their dusky wings, and those who were inclined to be sceptical are slightly sceptical again. But still they one and all bid a relieved, though outwardly regretful, farewell to the Major, with much expression of concern and anxious solicitude on his wife's behalf, and much inward gratitude that she has given them this delightful loophole of escape.

He does not ask them to remain; he feels that it would be a mockery, and that they would detect the insincerity of his expression if he did. He is honest and true, and void of the social veneer of society hypocrisy. He is only anxious for them

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to be gone, that he may have nothing to distract his time and thoughts from Muriel, and he does not express himself to the contrary.

He somewhat grudgingly tells his sister that she "can remain if she likes," which cannot be construed into a very warm and pressing invitation. But the truth is, he feels rather resentfully towards poor innocent Nell, as being the "first cause" of his darling's strange attack. Only for her unbridled tongue, he thinks, with a good deal of exasperation and much injustice, Muriel might never have been so smitten.

But the girl does not take advantage of this reluctantly given permission to stay. No one is more anxious to get away than pretty grey-eyed Nell, who deserves a little pity for this gloomy, "horrible," as she dubs it, termination, to her joyously anticipated visit. The soft bright cheeks are pale, and the witching eyes have contracted a scared, terrified expression, since she heard that awful music.

"No; I'll go at once with the others, Leonard dear," she declares, with nervous precipitancy. "Poor dear auntie will be lonely; it's the first time I've been away from her for more than a week together." (Ah! Nell, Nell, you shameless little hypocrite! were you not calmly contemplating but the other day deserting the same poor aunt for good and all in a year's time, and making your home here at the Hall?) "I'll come back again when darling Muriel is better;" though inwardly

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registering a solemn vow never to enter the gates of this fearful Manor House again. "I dare say I should be only in the way now," she concludes lamely and hurriedly, feeling that her affection for "darling Muriel" is not very ardently displayed by insisting on rushing off immediately her sister-in-law and cousin falls ill.

And so there is a general stampede; every one departs, and the only person who wishes, and would give much to remain a little while longer, is obliged to go with the rest. Yes; Professor Dysart lingers after the others have made their adieus, hoping that Major Erncliffe might possibly ask him to prolong his visit. He thinks it would not be very unnatural for him to do so, seeing that Leonard is alone now, save for his father-in-law coming and going when he can. But there is little chance of it; for if Leonard felt resentment against his sister, how much more warmly indignant does he feel with the Professor, to whom he attributes altogether the cloud that has descended on his home! He tries hard to disguise his sentiments, in memory of his former regard for Dysart; but he cannot completely banish a certain coldness of manner. And so, regretfully, the Professor, too, packs his portmanteau, and is off from the ill-fated house.

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After a little, Muriel is able to leave her bed; but she moves about in a strange, dull, spiritless way; and as the weeks pass on, and the New Year

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shivers in its early babyhood, an indefinite languor and depression, both of mind and body—which is, perhaps, not very unnatural in the circumstances—steals over her. Doubtless, when the expected heir to the united Varley and Erncliffe fortunes (the Major is a rich man since his uncle's death) is born, Muriel will be herself again. So reason Leonard and Dr. Hilliard, and so speaks Dr. Freeman.

And in the meantime she grows more and more depressed, nervous, gloomy, taking no delight in her usual occupations, refusing altogether to go out of doors; spending nearly all her time reclining on a couch in her dressing-room, in a sort of brooding melancholy.

Leonard gets uneasy and miserable. Though Muriel might be languid and weakly, why this strange morbidity of mind which evidences itself so plainly in the sad, dreary expression of the erstwhile bright face, now so wan and almost haggard; in the lovely azure eyes, which have since that Christmas Eve again contracted something of that singular frightened look so apparent in the first days of her widowhood; in the gloomy silence in which she wraps herself, and out of which, when spoken to, she comes with a start, and a glance of fearful appeal, showing that her thoughts have been far away? And the only change from this condition is when the mind, instead of seeming distressingly pre-occupied and absorbed, is sunk in a sort of lethargic torpor, akin to that which

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holds her body; when speech and thought seem alike impossible, and she lies as if in a waking sleep, indifferent to all around her.

Yes, Leonard is perfectly wretched. He has one of the first physicians down from London, in consultation with her father and Dr. Freeman; and the great man departs, after urbanely pocketing his thirty-guinea fee, assuring Major Erncliffe that he may make his mind quite easy; he need not be at all anxious, such cases are not very uncommon. The nervous system certainly wants tone; it seems as if the patient has received some mental shock, that, in her present condition, preys perhaps unduly on her mind; but when a certain happy event has taken place, Mrs. Erncliffe, he feels quite positive, will regain all her sweet, serene healthfulness, both of mind and of body.

. . . . . .

And it seems as if he was a true prophet—at least, for a while. . . . About the middle of February a little daughter is born to Muriel; and almost from that hour she seems a new being. A rapturous love for the tiny creature—her Leonard's child—fills her soul, and banishes all gloom and nervous depression. . . . Buoyant, exultant, joyous, she grows well marvellously fast—much too fast, as is said later. When baby is a month old, never has woman seemed brighter, happier, healthier, both in mind and in body.

But when baby is nearly two months old, there has come a change. Not that there is a return

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to the despondent, lethargic state; rather, she is possessed by a restless, feverish excitement that seems to increase each day. A nervous watchfulness, that amounts sometimes to an unaccountable sense of apparent anxious expectancy and apprehensive dread, takes the place of the singular brooding absorption of a few months back; her eyes wear the expression of one who does not sleep, or whose sleep is broken, disturbed, and unrefreshing; and once or twice as the weeks pass on, Major Erncliffe is startled and distressed, on being wakened by a slight noise in his room in the dead of night, to find his wife moving aimlessly about the chamber, fast asleep!

He got her back to bed each time without waking her; but this somnambulistic tendency somewhat frightens him. He does not know how often it may have been repeated without his knowledge, as in the usual way he is a very heavy sleeper, and wonders much how the trifling sound on these two occasions—merely the opening of a drawer—had aroused him. He speaks to Dr. Freeman, without saying anything to Muriel, fearing it might alarm her to hear that she walks in her sleep.

And it is then the medical man delivers himself of the opinion that he is afraid Mrs. Erncliffe has got well too quickly, that possibly she has made too free, and that it is now coming against her; that the nerves are much disordered, and great care will be needed in the future; that the very best thing

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Major Erncliffe could do would be to take her away for change of air and scene, as soon as the weather settles a little.

"Not abroad—no; a vigorous, bracing upland air is what would be most likely to blow the nervous mists away. What would you say to a tour through the northern Highlands? More easily reached than Switzerland, less fatigue, and quite as beneficial. Of course, St. Moritz and Pontresina in the Engadine are the fashion; but, for my part, I consider 'Far Lochaber' quite as good a tonic," continues Dr. Freeman urgently. "In the meantime, Major, you must contrive to keep Mrs. Erncliffe's mind tranquil, happy, gently amused, if possible; above all, to avoid anything that might disturb, excite, irritate, or, worst of all, frighten, etc."

And the very day after this long conversation with the doctor, who knows her constitution thoroughly, Major Erncliffe hears quite accidentally what may possibly have reached his wife's ears long before, and have caused or increased, in her present weakened, unsettled health, the strange nervous symptoms which so alarm and distress him. He hears—what detestable, absurd gossip it is! he thinks vindictively—that the Manor House ghost has been making herself unpleasantly conspicuous of late. For years she has been more or less of an intangible personage, believed in profoundly, as an uncomfortable, incontrovertible fact, but a shadowy, impalpable one, that has made its

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presence known to the present generation by sound only, and not by sight. Sundry strange, unaccountable noises have been occasionally reported as proceeding from the haunted eastern gable. Doubtless they existed in imagination only; but when this mental condition—so often but a very uncertain blessing—does exist amongst the lower classes at all, it is apt to take the form of superstition. And here in Varley Hall, there is at least valid excuse for all belief in startling phenomena; for is there not a legendary family ghost on hand (undoubtedly a mark, sign, seal, and token of respectability, though perhaps hardly an agreeable one), ready to be trotted out—would it be more harmonious to say *glided?*—descriptively, as occasion warrants, to appal the unwary stranger?

Three or four new servants, in addition to the old and numerous staff, have been engaged of late at the Hall, and, whether it is that, being strangers to the district and, hearing the tale of wonder for the first time, their imaginations, excited by novelty, are more prolific than those of the others, who are nearly all Westerham born and familiar with the legend from their earliest years, or whether they really saw and heard what they describe, none can say positively; but, be it as it may, Leonard hears to-day for the first time—the day his little daughter is two months old, and just a clear fortnight before Easter—that within the last six weeks the spectral lady has been seen on two or three occasions in the distance, on the stairs leading to the eastern

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gable. Once it was from outside she was visible; the gliding phantom form carrying a light, swiftly passing one of the staircase windows. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and the terrified servant advancing in stealthy fashion through the shrubbery, who had been indulging in unlicensed freedom, staying out without permission, trusting to the faith and friendship of a fellow-domestic for ingress at unlawful hours, was suddenly conscience-smitten, and regarding the unearthly apparition as a direct judgment for their offence, turned and fled precipitately, not daring to venture near the house again till the reassuring daylight embraced all things in its friendly, honest, mystery-killing clasp. Leonard is wild with distress and anger when he hears these reports.

"Confound them for a pack of beastly idiots!" he mutters in hot wrath. "What tremendous craven duffers they are! And what evil may not their wild, superstitious folly have already wrought? Muriel is almost sure to have heard something of these absurd tales, and in her present excitable state they would prey on her, and be Heaven knows how injurious. Look at the cautions Freeman gave me yesterday. And what am I to do? I dare not speak of the subject, to scoff at and deride it as it deserves, and laugh my darling out of any credence in their fantastic imaginings, because, by some most inconceivable good-luck, she may not have yet heard. And I shall not soon forget what a detestable ass I made of myself two years ago,

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when I insisted on detailing to her my ridiculous dream, when this same troublesome spectral lady, by the way, condescended to interview me in sleep-land." Major Erncliffe has long since come to regard that somewhat peculiar circumstance as a dream—strange, realistic, unaccountable, but still, only a dream. "Why, my dearest nearly fainted then; and now it might kill her to speak of it. And yet, unless she has caught some whisper of this confounded report, what is making her so odd and queer, and altogether unlike herself?"

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Yes, just a fortnight before Easter, Leonard Erncliffe makes the unpleasant discovery of the legendary lady's renewed predilection for making herself visible in the old Manor House. In the ghost theory itself he has not one whit of faith, summarily dismissing the problem when presented for discussion in terse phrase as "all rot!" Yet he cannot but recollect that his singular dream made a strong and disagreeable impression at the time, and as the days go by he finds himself haunted pertinaciously by the memory of that dream, which is all the stranger as he had quite forgotten it during those long months of love and unalloyed happiness. And now, as he tries to recollect it, he finds that the first part is clear and distinct in his memory, but the latter is almost completely faded and blurred. He again finds himself even wondering, did his dream reveal to him anything like the real eastern gable as it

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exists, or was it, as is the way with dreams, but a fancy picture, or possibly an effort of the mind to reproduce something he had read and long forgotten? We all know how thoughts, memories, associations, countless serried ranks of pictures, more vivid than ever glowed on any canvas, are packed away, unknown to us, in that vast silent picture-gallery, that wondrously mysterious storehouse as well as workshop—the brain of man.

Though more than four months resident in and master of Varley Hall, Leonard has never taken the trouble to verify this point, to decide the topographical accuracy or inaccuracy of his dream. And why? For the simple reason that the dream itself had entirely escaped his memory, and the eastern—or western gable, for that matter, presented no attractions that would warrant an exploring expedition. No one goes near them, and neither does he; the approach to the former, especially, being shut out from the rest of the house by a heavy swing baize door, which no one has the curiosity—or the courage, if we come to that, always excepting Leonard—to cross.

But now his thoughts are constantly reverting to that odd dream, recalling it by degrees, bit by bit, each little forgotten circumstance, save quite towards the end, which ever eludes him; and suddenly it smites him, with a strange shuddering chill of remembrance, that the face of the Manor House phantom, as seen by him in the eastern gable of dreamland, was the face of his Muriel!

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The next moment he pulls himself together with a slightly contemptuous laugh at his weakness. Is it possible those superstitious lunatics of servants have actually infected him with some of their insane imaginings? He will think no more of the whole absurd subject. The very proof that *his* was but the wildest dream, without meaning or motive, is evidenced by its ridiculous contradictoriness. He dreamed of the Manor House ghost, which, perhaps, was not very unnatural, seeing that he had heard the legend so often; and, with the charming consistency of dreams, the mystic lady wore his darling's face—which, again, for a dream, was all as it should be; for was not Muriel's sweet face imprinted on his heart, the only face on earth for him? If he had dreamt of an angel, that celestial vision would have worn his loved one's aspect.

He'll think of it no more, but devote himself to watching over his beloved wife, devising little distractions for her, if possible; trying to amuse and enliven, and also to soothe that highly-strung nervous nature, with the knowledge of his all-protecting, tender, abiding love.

And his efforts are rewarded with success, for during the next fortnight Muriel regains, to a great extent, her normal calm, bright cheerfulness and evenness of manner. The excitement and anxious restlessness and watchfulness gradually subside, and her utter delight and happiness in her little daughter, her supreme passion of love for baby Hilda, seems to increase each day.

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And so Leonard grows to feel once more intensely happy; he adores his wife and idolizes his child. Life has no more to give him. His cup is full of joy and sweetness unutterable, no "fennel floats" therein. And a great glad peace and thankfulness reign in his breast as the holy Easter season again comes round.

"May will be here in another week now," he reflects with pleasure. "And Muriel is so much stronger, and baby such a little brick—happy, healthy, handsome" (at two-and-a-half months old! But, after all, why not, with such a perfectly lovely mother?), "never crying, always jolly—that we may be off on our Highland tour as soon as we like. And, by Jove! I'll not be in a hurry to get back this time. Let Uncle Hilliard join us if he can't get along without his daughter; but I think Varley Hall will have seen the last of us as residents the day we start north. We shan't live here again. My pet disliked the idea of coming back to it from Italy, and it evidently does not agree with her. Perhaps it *is* a bit uncanny! At any rate, the dear girl has such terribly disagreeable associations with it, since poor old Varley's death, that none can wonder at her shrinking from it.

"I'll let the place. One ought easily get a good tenant—*new* people, of course, anxious to try to obtain the halo of a little antiquity, and hoping that even a faint borrowed reflection might dimly illumine them by residing in an old ancestral mansion. Cads, most likely; but if they pay the

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rent, what need we care? Old Jacob Varley would have been called a 'cad' by some hypercritical folk, I suppose; but, in spite of his '*cotton*' and his '*h's*,' the dear old chap had the soul of a true and high-minded gentleman.

"We'll buy a snug nest in Devonshire or Cornwall, and we might have a little box in Scotland also, or, perhaps, the west of Ireland. We've money enough to keep half a dozen places going. Let the old man come to us if he feels lonely; aunt Hilliard certainly is not a very lively companion of late. I can't think what's come to her; never saw a woman so changed! Morbid and gloomy, seems as if she'd something on her mind, unless the mind itself is touched; looks uncommonly like it, I must say. I believe her grandmother died in a madhouse. The strangest symptom in her case is how she seems to have lost all affection for Muriel, the girl she almost worshipped."

And so his musings wander off from one subject to another; but the dominant feeling in his breast on this Easter Saturday morning, is a serene content and happiness, a tranquil joy, which is all the sweeter from being coupled with an inexpressible feeling of relief from the anxious strain and uneasiness that have possessed him for weeks.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

REALIZATION OF THE VISION.

NEVER was Muriel brighter, sweeter, or more radiant than she is all through the hours of this lovely spring day. She has rapturously caught at the idea of the Highland trip; they will go "as soon as possible," she declares energetically—"in another week or two, at farthest—and not come back for months and months. It will be twice as delicious as going through the tiresome, beaten track of continental travel. I did it twice with poor dear Jacob, and once with you, love, and I am sick of it. And, Lennie darling, we shall not confine ourselves to the prosaic mainlaind, but have a yacht and go cruising about among those northern lakes and islets. I think I should like to live on the water, and make a regular mermaid of baby Hilda.

"Yes, we will have a yacht, dear, and visit all those delightful, out-of-the-way island nooks that must be so exquisitely wild, picturesque, and, above all, unhackneyed, judging by Mr. Black's charming books. Perhaps we'll create our darling

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another 'Princess,' if not of 'Thule,' of some remote, lonely, lovely region, away in those northern seas."

So she plans, and laughs and jests, and is apparently altogether her own gay, girlish, light-hearted self. And the twilight falls upon the land, and night, with his gloomy cohorts, takes possession of the darkling sky; and, by-and-by, sleep and silence brood over the earth's dark breast, and the old Manor House is hushed in the soft stillness of repose.

And the hours pass on in the strange unconsciousness of slumber, so mysterious an element of our being, in which we seem to lead a dual life; and the second hour after midnight has just rung out upon the silent air from the clock in the new stables, when Leonard wakes suddenly in his luxurious bedchamber.

Vague, sweet, misty, are his first half-roused thoughts. Nothing startled him, nothing disturbs him, as he lies in lazy contentment for a few moments, gazing sleepily at the light—for since Muriel's illness they have burned a night-lamp—the shadowed rays of which dimly illumine the large, handsome room. Then, with a gentle sigh of serene satisfaction, he turns round to go to sleep again; but as he turns, his drowsy, half-closed eyes fall upon the space at his side, which is blank and empty!

For a moment he looks with a stupid, non-comprehending stare at the vacant place, where

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Muriel was sleeping so calmly and sweetly, more than two hours ago, when he came to bed; then, with a rush, he remembers her sleep-walking proclivities. In an instant his mind is vividly awake and alert, and he jumps out of bed. Where is she? She is not in the room, and the door is carefully closed as it was—nothing seems disturbed. How softly she went, or how heavily he must have slept, he thinks, as he hurriedly throws on some clothes. Where can she have gone? She never yet left the room in her sleep—at least, not to his knowledge. What terrible accident may not happen to her in that helpless, somnambulistic state, in that great, rambling house? And a cold moisture of apprehensive dread bursts on his brow.

Then, in the act of lighting one of the candles standing in fanciful bronze and silver filagree candlesticks on the dressing-table, he notices that the other is gone, and he grows swiftly restful, easy, assured. How foolish he has been to be so alarmed! Of course, his darling woke, and grew fidgety about little Hilda, and, without disturbing him, slipped away to pay a nocturnal visit to the nursery, fearing the little precious creature might perhaps have vanished in a fairy-car, etc.—to assure herself, in fact, of the well-being of her baby. She has done so on one or two occasions, since her small daughter has been separated from her at night—a step on which the doctor insisted more than a month ago. So, with a fairly tran-

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quil heart, Leonard leaves the room, and seeks the night-nursery near at hand, meditating but a gentle reproof on the loving folly that thus induces Muriel to run the risk of serious cold, out of her warm bed, but half-clad ; and these spring nights are chilly. If she must know how the little one fares during the silent hours, why not let him go and see?

And so thinking, he steps softly into the shadowed room where his little girl is sleeping. A night-lamp burns here also, and its dim light reveals to him the nurse and her charge both fast asleep, the little one in her own pretty crib at nurse's side. But it also shows him that there is no third presence in the room, and a sudden cold clutch of fear grasps his heart in icy bonds. Where is Muriel? Where is he to seek her, when he has failed to find her here?

For a moment or two he stands irresolute by the crib, looking down lovingly on the tiny rose-leaf face; then, with an irresistible impulse, he stoops and touches the tender velvet cheek lightly with his lips, while an unconscious gush of prayer for the welfare of the little helpless creature, so inexpressibly dear to him, wells straight from his heart.

Then, again taking up the light, he turns to renew his search for his—as he now feels—sleeping wife! And, with a strange and singular foreboding, premonition, instinct—which is it?—he involuntarily takes his way to the back staircase of

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the disused upper stories that leads to the *eastern gable.*

Yes; it is as it were some mysterious influence, not his own will, that guides his steps thus. Never yet has he set foot upon this stairway, as it is quite removed from the occupied portion of the house; and it is with a sort of dazed shock that he now finds himself quickly ascending these dreary, unfamiliar, and yet at the same time startlingly familiar stairs—familiar, inasmuch as they are the stairs of his dream.

Every turn, every curve, every sudden, unexpected ascent and descent, are horribly, unnaturally familiar. These remote, lonely passages that he traverses so swiftly now, and that echo so dismally to his tread, he has never been through in the flesh before; but his spirit-feet have trod them, and their fantastic, intricate windings are indelibly impressed upon his memory.

All is exactly as it was two years ago, when that extraordinary dream or vision revealed to him an unknown region, and incidents still hidden behind the veil of the future; for is he not now, as in that singular dream, hastening through the darkness and silence of the olden, unchanged part of the Manor House, stepping swiftly through the night's stillness in pursuit of some one—only in his dream, he knew not whom he followed, or why?

And still, on he goes unerringly, with a wildly beating heart, while a feeling of awe and mystery

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grows upon him, mingled with a dread expectancy. He feels as if he were groping for the key to some mystic cipher—groping for the light through gloom impenetrable; as if he were just hovering on the confines of some unfathomed abyss, into which he may plunge at any step. The light may be glorious beyond that gulf, but he cannot know, and sees only the darkness of the way.

. . . . . .

And now an overwhelming impression comes on him suddenly, with the certainty of conviction, that the shrouding veil that hangs between the known and the unknown is about to be lifted for him to-night. And he pauses, with a shuddering gasp, and a half-formed resolve to relinquish his task and retrace his steps. He has even forgotten why he is here; forgotten his dream, forgotten Muriel. All reality seems swallowed up in this strange, new, inexplicable, brooding sense of awe. Fear—actual fear—for the first time in his life, blanches the cheek of the brave soldier, and palsies his strong limbs. It is the haunted, unhallowed air of this lonely eastern gable that is affecting his nerves, he thinks, trying to shake off the strange influence that weighs on him so eerily. He will go back. What folly has brought him here? But just as he has made this resolution, an indefinite breath of sound is wafted to his abnormally sharpened ears, a something that breaks the terrible stillness with faintest echo. It might be a distant footfall, a shutting door, a voice's instant

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murmur. But, whatever it is, it breaks for a moment the weird spell which has held him. He remembers Muriel and her danger, and, with suddenly quickened vitality, dashes round the curve near which he has been hesitating; and with the hasty motion, and, perhaps, some sudden draught, the candle in his hand flares brightly and goes out, and he is alone in this desolate, haunted gable, in complete darkness!

And with this horror, his momentarily renewed courage and fearlessness fade. He has no matches, no possible means of striking a light. He has very nearly reached the farthest point in this eerie east wing of the Manor House; to retrace his steps in that profound obscurity is well-nigh impossible, with all those extraordinary turns and irregular levels. To remain here—*here!*—through the remaining hours of darkness, till the returning blessed rays of earliest dawn lighten ever so dimly those gaunt, ghost-like windows, seems all that is left to him; and yet, how can he do it, with this weird sense of horror, of some impending awful revelation, again growing strong upon him? He is too far removed from the inhabited part of the house for his wildest cries to bring any one to his aid; besides, even if he were heard, none would venture near this haunted wing, and any startling sounds proceeding from it would be attributed to the phantom, whose royal prerogative is vested in this her kingdom.

And as he thus stands in helpless, fearful dis-

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may, staring with wild, straining eyes into the thick darkness before him, it is suddenly lifted slightly, grows less dense and oppressive; a faint lightening of the shrouding gloom becomes palpable, at what seems the far end of a long, narrow corridor.

He watches the growing light with fascinated eyes. It gets stronger, though still but weak and uncertain, and seems as if it were advancing from the right-hand of this long passage, at one end of which he stands. *What* is it? *Who* carries it? . . . He fights against the supernatural dread that threatens to overcome him. Is he about to behold the ghost of the Manor House gable?

And even as he asks himself this question, the figure bearing the light glides into sight, and for a moment he feels faint and weak with an unearthly terror; the next he is moving softly, slowly along that shadowed passage, with all his fears of the last ten minutes vanished, moving in pursuit of that mysterious presence, for even at that distance, in that uncertain groping duskiness, he plainly saw that the moving form was no phantom, but his own beloved wife—Muriel!

She is evidently asleep, and he must follow her to guard her. To wake her suddenly, and *here*, in such startling circumstances, might kill her! What must he do? And what brings her here? What associations can she possibly have with this shunned portion of the house, to induce her to visit it in sleep? And so he follows with softened

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steps and a wondering, anxious heart; he dreads least his hushed footfalls may rouse that sleeping swiftly-moving figure.

She has turned the last angle now in this strange old record of a sixteenth century builder's wild caprices. She is out of sight, and he steps more quickly through the returned darkness, the rays from that distant solitary candle not piercing the gloom sufficiently to dispel it, when carried at right angles to this narrow corridor. He hastens, because he fears Muriel may take some sudden winding turn he knows not of, and begin her dangerous descent without his vigilant, loving care ready to save her from possible peril.

She is evidently strangely familiar with this banned portion of the Manor House. She must have approached this extreme point of the eastern gable by some unguessed passage connecting it with the western gable, which, though unused, has not the evil reputation attaching to this dreary east wing. There may be some intricate winding way on ahead, which will lead her back again to the west side of the house, and so he dreads to lose the faint ghost-like flicker of that far-off light, for losing that, he loses all!

He has forgotten his dream completely, and how strangely it is being fulfilled. All his faculties are concentrated in the one absorbing idea to watch over Muriel, and protect her from harm.

And now, as he almost gains the end of this long gallery or passage, he hears a sound as of

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a key inserted in a somewhat creaking rusty lock, and as he quickly turns the corner, he is just in time to see that gliding figure, with its fluttering white draperies and floating yellow hair, pass within an open door, which swings slowly to again, with a low, melancholy clang, leaving him for the second time in absolute darkness; but he feels no fear now.

Thank God, Muriel has entered a room from which there scarcely can be—owing to its position with regard to the outer wall—any other mode of egress. Thus he will gain on her gently, and without alarming or waking her—unless that wretched door has already done so—and will be able to lead her back with infinite tenderness and care the way he has come.

And so thinking, he gropes his way to the door, which is but a few yards off. It is a minute or so before it yields to his touch, and when it does, it emits a rasping sound which causes Leonard to swear inwardly.

Then he steps softly within the chamber, and a strange sight meets his astonished gaze. It is an exact reproduction of his dream, though he recollects it not now.

At the end of the room farthest from the door, just beneath the old casement window, kneels Muriel on the dusty, decaying floor. She has removed a long piece of the rotting skirting-board, and in the vacancy left she is searching eagerly for something with trembling, groping hand.

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What does she seek? And for the first time to-night, a feeling of curiosity, mingled with a nameless apprehension, enters Major Erncliffe's breast. He crosses the room softly, and noiselessly stands beside her.

And now he can see her face clearly, the candle at her side revealing its every line distinctly; but when he looks on that exquisite face, set and stony in the fixed glare of the somnambulist, the new-born curiosity almost dies, while a great pity and love contend for the mastery in his heart. . . . His darling! How sad it is to see her thus; it is almost like—like—madness! and he shudders horribly as he remembers the taint of insanity in her family. Her great-grandmother died mad! Well, that is far off; but, then, her mother has become decidedly odd lately, and—but he's a fool; *this* is only sleep-walking! And as he so thinks, the little groping hand closes at last on something in the darkness of that aperture, and is withdrawn.

He fancies he sees a glitter of glass, and makes an involuntary movement to look closer, to see better what this strangely hidden object can be. But as he moves, his foot inadvertently touches that piece of rotting, displaced wainscot, which leans angle-wise against the wall.—Was it not so in that mystic vison, though he has never remembered clearly quite up to this point?—It falls with a crash, and with the sudden sound Muriel wakes, with a strangled cry of fright, glancing round her with wild, scared eyes.

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Leonard seizes her hand, with loving, soothing words. His sole thought is to reassure her, to comfort her with the knowledge of his protecting presence, feeling how intensely terrified she will feel to find herself in this eerie haunted gable in the dead of the night; but his grasp is laid unthinkingly on the hand that holds that concealed something! And, with a frenzied look on the face that has swiftly grown horribly awake, conscious, and filled with a desperate, defiant fear, Muriel screams again—a wild, ghastly scream of mingled grief and terror; her eyes glare into his, with an awful, hideous horror in their depths. . . . His grasp involuntarily tightens on that hand he holds. . . . A light of maddening rage—despair—which is it?—sweeps over the beautiful face he loves so well.

"*Never!* You or I shall die first!" she mutters, with rigid lips. Then, with a sudden supreme effort, she wrenches herself free from his clasp, pushing him at the same time violently from her, with a singular new-born strength. Simultaneously, a small phial falling to the ground, there is a crash as of broken glass, and immediately a penetrating, clinging smell of "bitter almonds." He, all unprepared, loses his balance, sways, and staggers heavily against the window; the old decayed wood-work cracks, splits, gapes!—he clutches frantically, convulsively at nothing! . . . The whole space where the window was, and the mouldering wall beneath, are gone in a moment!

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. . . There is a rush of cold night air. . . . And *one* figure stands alone, within that desolate haunted chamber—immovable—petrified—a frozen, awful horror on the ashen face!

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE WAIL OF A LITTLE CHILD.

"*LEONARD!*" she gasps, with the force of a shriek; but the single word falls with but a hissing murmur on the silent air. And, in answer, a faint, dull thud is borne to her frenzied, straining ear, resounding from those cruel flagged depths so far below! . . . "Both!" she whispers to herself, as she crouches to the floor, still glaring fearfully at that blank, terrible space, through which he who is her very life has gone forth for ever. . . . "*Both!*" she repeats, in that same strange, awful whisper. "*With the same hand!*"—holding out that small right hand, and gazing at it as if it were some fiend apart; while the dawning light of madness gradually steals into those fixed blue eyes. . . . "*He* drank it, and I saw him die! Those eyes—those eyes—they will be with me through all eternity! . . . Jacob—Jacob—forgive—forgive!" —in wild appeal, suddenly throwing herself on her knees, with outstretched hands, as if imploring pardon from some invisible presence.

And there, in the dim further end of the room,

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surely there can be discerned a vague shadowy form, gliding through the gloom; an impalpable simulacrum of humanity; a phantom shape; but a woman's shape! For was it not here, in this very chamber, the two-centurys'-old murder took place? Is it not here that the long-buried secret lay hid?

But the frantic gaze of madness sees the spirit of a murdered husband in that awful something, that glides nearer, still more near!

"Torment me not!" she moans. "I am guilty—yes, guilty—guilty—guilty! . . . You have come for me. You bring the odour of the grave. My place is ready, but not with you! No—no, I say—not with you! . . . I cannot come! . . . See! his hands are fleshless, and his head a skull! . . . He comes closer—closer!"

. . . . . .

The appalled eyes, burning with the fire of insanity, glare horribly at that floating unearthly form, now past her, and fading again into the nothingness from which it seemed to evolve itself.

"Save me! save me!" she shrieks, cowering back, and covering her face with her hands.

. . . . . .

"*He* calls me!" she murmurs, after a moment or two's pause, letting her hands drop to her sides, and lifting her face, full of a new-born joy and peace.

She has forgotten the ghastly presence which has vanished; forgotten him whose avenging spirit she

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thought had come for her. She remembers only her love, that infinite and fatal love, which has been the destroyer of a soul that would have been pure and white and fair but for the deadly, blighting influence of an unconquerable, deathless passion, which was allowed to master and conquer and kill, where it ought to have sweetened and hallowed and ennobled. In so much can our crowning virtues be turned into our most crushing, soul-slaying vices.

"He calls me—I hear his voice! Yes, Lennie darling, I am coming!"—moving slowly across to that black, yawning void where the wall and window were, and through which the night-wind rushes in unchecked. "It is sweet and soft and cool down there among the daisies and pink clover by the old stile. . . . I am nearly always first at the trysting-place, Lennie; you are often a laggard, sir; but you got the start of me this time. . . . No, love, you need have no fear; I will be as true as death; no one shall ever come between us; I am yours and you are mine, for ever and ever! Go to India, if you must; but I will be no 'false Imogen.' Your spirit will not need to come 'to bear me to the tomb,' a bride!"

She is once again, in fancy, innocent Muriel Hilliard, before she was tempted by the old man's wealth.

"Yes, Leonard, we will go immediately, in a few days. I hate this house; there is a shadow of evil upon it! We will sail away into those northern,

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unknown seas, and make our darling baby an ocean princess."

She pauses, as if hearkening to a soundless voice.

"You are ready, dear, and waiting? So am I. We will go at once, and together. Thank God! always together."

A smile of bliss unspeakable flits over the lovely insane face. There is a flutter of white drapery through that gaping void, and the room is empty of all human presence, while in a moment another dull, hollow thud echoes faintly from below! And the stars in the chill April sky look down from their wondrous heights of calm and tranquil serenity, and make no sign. Nature never makes a sign, but is always unresponsive, cruelly, stoically indifferent, when helpless man is at his hour of direst need and peril.

> "How strikingly the course of nature tells,
> By its light heed of human suffering,
> That it was fashioned for a happier world!"

. . . . . .

And then, into that awful, soul-curdling silence that has suddenly fallen on this fearful, accursed room, steal, with weird and whispering breath, the notes of a violin! At first so faint, so shadowy, so unreal—as if it were the distant, dying echo of a forgotten harmony—that it scarcely disturbs or breaks that terrible, brooding stillness.

And yet one feels instinctively that these unearthly, mystic vibrations, that are but as yet the suggestion of sound, rather than sound itself

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and are consequently infinitely more horrible and impressive, laden with supernatural awe, reach not from afar, but are even here—*here*, in the portion of space enclosed within these fatal walls! Yes, here is the invisible dwelling-place of that mysterious phantom violin!

And now that wailing whisper swells into wild, surging, terrible strains. Like no music ever heard on earth is this, that throbs and pants and pulsates like some caged, frantic creature, in such vehement, fierce clangour, through this doomed chamber of the eastern gable.

Louder, faster, wilder it grows, till all heaven and earth seems to have resolved itself into this one sense of crushing, ghastly, maddening sound! But through all the demoniacal horror of the music may be heard an ever-recurring note of triumph; as if a weird, malignant exultation shrieked its hellish joy throughout this terrible, unearthly "dance of Death."

. . . . . .

But suddenly the measure changes, as if another phantom hand evoked the strains, laden with a mysterious, awful pathos, that now sigh and sob through the desolate room. Saturated with an unutterable despair and woe, weighted with a burden of inexplicable, unending sorrow, the mystic violin breathes its last weird, unearthly harmonies.

By degrees, the moaning, dirge-like lament becomes fainter and fainter, gradually dying away into a thrilling, whispering breath. Less and less

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it grows, like broken, inarticulate, far-away sobs of dying anguish, and at last all is still.

. . . . . .

And again, as silence falls once more upon the room, that shadowy, phantasmal shape evolves itself from misty vagueness, and glides across the floor of this doubly fated chamber.

The twin tragedy has been enacted within its shuddering walls. Will the haunting spirit of evil be at last content, and rest?

Into the light of the solitary flaring candle that awful thing floats. There is a momentary vision of streaming yellow hair, a rigid dead face, and flowing white robes, through which the wall beyond is visible; it is, as it were, a ghastly shadow, or presentment, on which Death has set his seal, of *her* who has just gone forth into the silent night.

. . . . . .

Closer still to the light it comes!

. . . . . .

Ah! the very spirit of murder itself! Yellow hair, white, dead face, and whiter garments, all streaked and splashed with the fell crimson tide. . . . The stream of blood, still warm and wet and flowing, is the curse she has carried through the centuries! . . . That terrible prophecy has been, indeed, fulfilled. . . . That awful curse is now complete. . . . The crime of the long-forgotten past *has* been reproduced in "dual shape;" for she in whom the guilty Dorothea chose to accomplish her vengeance—whether really only Muriel Hil-

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liard, or actually, by some incomprehensible mystery, Eunice Beresford, clad in new robes of flesh —has, in truth, worked it out to its ghastly end.

The old husband was murdered for the lover's sake; and now, though not intentionally, the lover, who was also a husband, has been slain by the same small white hand! . . . The crime of suicide has even repeated itself in this fell chamber.

. . . . . .

The cup of horrors is full. . . . The weird of the Beresfords is at last fulfilled. And now, will this haunting spirit be laid? Will that formless presence of evil, that active, living, dominating "will-power" of the dead cease to subdue, and magnetize, and force to sin the helpless living—those who have been possibly unconsciously influenced and compelled to crime by this terrible, unearthly power, or force, dwelling unthought of in their midst?

. . . . . .

The fearful thing again fades into a formless, misty shadow, which slowly vanishes, and as it does so, a low, mocking, demoniac laugh rings eerily through the chamber, and all is still again. . . . Stillness deep and profound as that of the grave. . . . Stillness that is broken in another part of that great desolate mansion by the shrill, wailing cry of a very little child, the sobbing, wild, unconscious lament of a young baby, who wakes in the heart of the night's silence with a yearning cry of unknown sorrow—a mysterious, sudden,

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wailing grief, which the watchful nurse soothes and calms and comforts; and the tiny creature drops off asleep again with a pitiful catching of the frail little breath, and all is still once more!

What did that atom of humanity mourn? Did it know, by some divine, wondrous instinct, past man's finite understanding, of what has happened in the brooding darkness of this fatal night? Did it wail and yearn and cry for the two who have gone forth and left it alone,—left it to make its solitary pilgrimage across life's barren wastes, bereft of those who were its natural protectors?

> "An infant crying in the night,
> And with no language but a cry."

But our grosser mortality cannot interpret the cry; and, perchance, the babe left fatherless and motherless, within a brief half hour, mourns the two out there under the silent stars, lying almost side by side in the awful stillness of death—sudden, violent, terrible death—with mangled, bleeding bodies, and on one face a great and hideous horror, as if the shock received before death annulled the fear and agony of the death itself; while on the other still lingers the terrible smile of unmistakable insanity!

. . . . . .

An awful, ghastly sight for the sweet, rose-coloured spring dawn to find out by-and-by, and reveal to a horrified world.

. . . . . .

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But still a stranger, if not more awful sight, is that which meets the astonished gaze a few hours later, when she who was Muriel Erncliffe is laid upon her bed for the last time, with tortured limbs composed for their final rest.

The face is totally uninjured; but it is no longer the face of the beautiful, brilliant young creature, who has been in such rapid succession Muriel Hilliard, Muriel Varley, and Muriel Erncliffe; it is the face of a middle-aged, nay, rather an elderly woman—a woman not far from fifty years old; a woman with a sad, sweet, patient, face—a face that was lovely exceedingly in its far-away youth; a face strangely like that of *her* who went out through that terrible gable window into the night's darkness, only grown old, quite old, and faded, and weary, and sorrow-stricken. The golden hair is gray, and the milk-white skin is lined and withered.

The face that lies upon the pillow in Muriel Erncliffe's luxurious bed-chamber is *not* Muriel's, but—that of *Eunice Beresford*, who died six and twenty years before!

. . . . . .

Yes, even Eunice! startling and mystical as seems the swift, unaccountable transformation.

. . . . . .

And though the ghastly horror in that awful distant room—horror quickly succeeded by *madness*, combined with terror and despair — might suddenly bleach these amber tresses, and dull those wondrous azure eyes, even shrivelling the

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soft skin; yet, how has that unmistakable look of *age*, that look of having lived a long and shadowed life, come down and set its seal upon the bright young beauty, the passionate, ardent life of Muriel Erncliffe?

A chastened, holy look of sainted resignation to an unhappy fate is the characteristic of the face we now gaze upon, so widely different from the radiant, joyous, intensely living, youthful aspect of her whose strange history has ended here so mysteriously.

. . . . . .

Is it even a proof incontrovertible that that weird, terrible writing, that mystic prophecy, has been in *every* part fulfilled? or is it only another marvellous, incomprehensible coincidence? thinks Professor Dysart, as he stands and gazes, with appalled eyes, and a great awe in his breast, at the extraordinary phenomena before him. . . . The mysterious change in the dead woman astounds and confuses the other onlookers, filling them with a startled, fearful dismay; but to him who holds the weird key to this mystery and tragedy; to him who *saw* with his own living eyes Eunice Beresford lying dying, and Eunice Beresford lying dead, and now, after all those years, looks upon the same picture, a climax of mystified horror is reached past comprehension!

. . . . . .

But whether Eunice Beresford really *did* live again, through some awful mystery of being that

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we cannot yet even hope to touch in thought, in the guise of Muriel Hilliard, and worked out in her new presentment the horrible, unearthly curse laid upon her and her house by the sinful Dorothea; or whether all these phenomenal points of agreement with the hidden writing, discovered by Desmond Dysart, the Professor's father, a quarter of a century before, were but a series of weird and ghastly coincidences, — still the one great and unalterable fact remains, that the "will-power"—the dead, yet still occultly *living* will —of Dorothea Beresford, remained active and dominant through the centuries, exercising a mysterious, unsuspected, magnetizing influence on the living, subduing and compelling them to certain predestined ends.

And that this mystic, awful force, power, influence —call it what we will—of the minds of the dead, may surround us, though we guess it not, and may be a mighty, potent, unconquerable factor in our life-history, in the world's history—above all, in the history of what appears like inexplicable crime—still remains a problem to be solved by science.

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CHAPTER XX.

MISERRIMA!

ONE last tableau in this record of a mysterious and terrible tragedy.

. . . . . .

Some few weeks later a woman, with weak, uneven steps, ceaselessly paces a padded room in a certain private lunatic asylum not far from Westerham.

Night and day she is watched, her attendants being regularly changed every few hours, so that they may never sleep at their post; though, even if alone for a space, it would be hard to imagine how she could injure herself, guarded as she is from the possibility of secreting any object that might be used as a weapon. But the insane are possessed of an extraordinary, an incredible cunning—cunning that often baffles the highest intellectual intelligence; and so it is thought wise to take all precaution.

See her as she walks untiringly to and fro—to and fro; slight, frail, bent, with snow-white hair, though her years scarcely number more than half a century, and wan and haggard face. . . . Now she raises her head, and there, plainly visible across

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the front of the throat, is a terrible wound, not yet quite healed—a frightful gash that just missed being fatal. Is it any wonder that they watch her as they do?

. . . . . .

Now hark! She speaks, and the burden of her speech is always the same.

"I saw her! I saw her pour it into the night-draught. I stood at the open door and saw her. She did not know I was there, and she forgot the looking-glass. I never guessed what it was till afterwards. I smelt the bitter almonds, strong—so strong, but never dreamed of wrong. How could I? My child—my own child—whom I nursed at my breast—whom I loved and worshipped more than I did my God—a murderess! And then to keep this awful secret always locked in my bosom; for I must never, never betray her. But I can't; I feel it is driving me mad—mad—mad! Sometimes I feel that my mind is nearly gone, and that I must cry it aloud. I feel the madness, the insane desire to tell—to tell what I alone know—stealing over me. And it will be so if I live. But I won't live—I won't run the risk of letting slip that terrible thing! And when I am dead, her guilty secret will be safe, it will be buried with me. . . . I'd do it at once, at once, but I am a coward, a miserable, trembling coward! . . . My child, my own and only child! O God! a murderess! . . . I will die to save her from betrayal, but I will never look upon her face again!"

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And so, with a moaning, terrible sob, the heart-breaking monologue ceases, only to recommence a few minutes later, with the reiteration of insanity, and but slight deviation of expression.

And thus, poor unhappy Mrs. Hilliard passes the remnant of her days in unending lament for her daughter's sin; but she does not know, and will never know, the awful termination of the tragedy. . . . The events of that fatal Easter Eve are hidden from her by the cloud that has mercifully come down and obscured her understanding. For by a strange and weird coincidence, on the same night, at the same hour that her daughter died, mad and a suicide, she, for that daughter's sake (the instinct of love and the struggling effort to defend the creature loved still lingering strong and faithful when all else was growing dark), feeling the insanity overcoming her, made, with the last flicker of departing reason, the determined and desperate attempt upon her life of which we see the cruel mark. It was not quite successful; but when she awoke from the stupor of unconsciousness that lay upon her many days, her mind was wholly gone.

. . . . . .

And thus this tale of crime and sorrow and mystery which we have followed "to the bitter end," proves once again how terribly true are the awful words from the sacred Book, "The wages of sin is death."

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